University of Alberta

"The Power and the Second Sight":

Dis/Empowerment of the Spirit in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence

by
Virginia Jill Manderson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 1998

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Dedication

I dedicate these words to my mother, Eileen Manderson, who has, of late, been finding her own in short supply.

ABSTRACT

In this project I examine ways in which Margaret Laurence's respective protagonists interpret their "Gods," and how these interpretations affect their lives. I propose that each protagonist develops her consciousness and her creativity, throughout the fictional works as a whole, to a point where God, or the "Holy Spirit"–which Laurence finds "easier to say than God" (*Dance* 14)–is recreated in the image of a woman, and I suggest that this new deity is more closely allied to anarchic "pagan" constructions than to the more stiffly structured Christian ones. It is this process of re-creation which empowers Laurence's characters, who often seem disempowered by their inability to identify with the "orthodox" deity presented, usually an omniscient white male. As the protagonists become creators themselves, however, their relationship with the outside deity changes from one of master and servant to one of parity.

The seven works discussed in this project reflect Laurence's *major* works of fiction. Each chapter focuses on one novel or collection of short stories by Laurence. They are arranged chronologically based on publication date reflecting what I believe is a progression in the protagonists' abilities to come to terms with their gods, both religious and societal ones, and to develop coping mechanisms which eventually grant them personal power and perspicacious insight.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Nora Foster Stovel, for her support and encouragement, and to acknowledge the direction I received from her in our graduate class on Margaret Laurence. I am especially indebted to Dr. Stovel for insights on the *Jest of God* chapter of this project. I would like to thank all of my committee members for their patience and guidance. I would also like to thank John Smith for the insights he offered during our many discussions on this project, and for his tireless faith.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: *This Side Jordan* 10

Chapter 2: *The Tomorrow-Tamer* 21

Chapter 3: *The Stone Angel* 32

Chapter 4: *A Jest of God* 47

Chapter 5: *The Fire-Dwellers* 60

Chapter 6: *A Bird in the House* 75

Chapter 7: *The Diviners* 87

Conclusion 101

Works Cited 104

Being chosen by a character Laurence describes in religious terms. It is a sense of grace, or being possessed.

Hans Hauge ("The Novel Religion" 123)

If triangles made a god, they would give him three sides.

Charles de Montesquieu

Introduction

The Archdeacon of York, upset over the prospect of a woman playing God in a production of the ancient English Mystery Plays, declared in 1996 that "We are made in God's image . . . not the other way around" (McDonald 47). I would argue that precisely the opposite is true, at least of the western Christian God, who is most certainly made in the image of man. Any threat to that image is perceived by "man" as a threat to himself and his own sense of power over the universe. As Mary Daly says in *Beyond God the Father*, "If God is a male, then the male is God" (19).

Different religious traditions deeply affect the spirit, the essence, of Margaret Laurence's protagonists, who, according to Leslie-Ann Hales, "yearn for God to be involved in their world" (87). Gerard Cullen calls Laurence an "essentially religious writer whose background is rooted in Christianity" (iii), and Laurence tells us in her memoir, *Dance on the Earth* (1989), that religion is one of the "major threads" (99) running through her works, although she claims not to advocate "orthodox"[1] beliefs. She presents a multitude of spiritual influences on her characters, ranging from the polytheistic tribal customs in her African stories to the failing Christian traditions of the western world, especially as they pertain to women.

In this project I examine ways in which Laurence's respective protagonists interpret their "Gods," and how these interpretations affect their lives; I propose that each protagonist develops her consciousness and her creativity, throughout the fictional works as a whole, to a point where God, or the "Holy Spirit"–which Laurence finds "easier to say than God" (*Dance* 14)–is recreated in the image of a woman, and I suggest that this new deity is more closely allied to anarchic "pagan"[2] constructions than to the more stiffly structured Christian ones. It is this process of re-creation which empowers

[1] Laurence's use of the word *orthodox* is discussed on pages 3-4 of this "Introduction."
[2] My use of the word *pagan* is discussed on pages 3-4 of this introduction.

Laurence's characters, who often seem disempowered by their inability to identify with the "orthodox" deity presented, usually an omniscient white male.[3] As the protagonists become creators themselves, however, their relationship with the outside deity changes from one of master and servant to one of parity.

Some of these terms are slippery. What exactly is the "spirit," and what constitutes "empowerment"? What falls within the parameters of "orthodox" and "pagan"? The word "spirit," from the Latin word for "breath," has secular, religious, and supernatural significance. In the secular sense, it is that which animates matter, enlivens material substances, such as the breath of air a newborn takes. Religiously, spirit is used to define the deity of one's choice. In Christianity, for example, the Holy Spirit would be God or Jesus Christ. Beyond religion and materialism, spirit connotes supernatural and incorporeal manifestations, such as ghosts. In general usage, it is also that indefinable thing within a person which gives him or her a unique strength of character, thus, when one's "spirit is broken" one is deemed to have lost an independence or freedom essential to fully develop individual dreams. The spirit goes beyond the physical. However, since it is either housed in the physical or perceived by it, surely the two become integral. When I talk about the spirit of a character, I am referring to that which is untouchable by human hands, but not necessarily uninfluenced by the state of the body or the things that happen to the body which it inhabits. The spirit is the essential element of humans which houses what Jane Flax, in her *Thinking Fragments*, calls our "core self" or "true self" and is "a *creative* core of being and aliveness" (112, italics mine). To empower the spirit, then, would be to encourage full development of one's creative possibilities, without restricting either body or mind.

I use the word "god" in the Western Christian tradition, except where it obviously falls under "pagan" convention. Christianity itself, which began as a movement within Judaism, spurred by the interpretations and teachings of Jesus Christ, has developed into three major branches: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. Laurence's works do not touch on the Eastern Orthodox, but are confined to the Western world's adaptations of Catholicism and Protestantism. In her later life, Laurence regularly attended the United Church, a union formed in 1925, mostly of Presbyterian and Methodist followers, and the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. Most of her main characters, with the exception of the Tonnerres, are Protestants. When Laurence refers to her beliefs and/or practices as not being "orthodox," she is using the word in its literal, not sectarian (as in Eastern Orthodox), sense. The word "orthodox" has Greek roots and literally means "right in opinion"; Laurence's references indicate that she does not necessarily hold the opinions of the United Church that are currently considered "acceptable," even though this church is one of the most liberal in Western society and generally avoids a narrow standard of correctness. However, since the *Issue of Formal Protestantism*, written in 1526, states that "in matters which concern God's

[3] If the spirit within needs to identify itself with a supernatural external force in order to gain a sense of power--that is, the ability to effect change--then women are at a disadvantage when the only god presented is masculine.

honour and salvation . . . everyone must stand and give account before God for himself" ("Protestantism"), it would seem that orthodoxy within Protestantism is, by definition, very much a matter of personal choice.

Laurence's use of "orthodox" is perhaps best revealed in the following anecdote. Having been attacked as a heretic by certain religious and social groups who actively campaigned to have her novels removed from courses in literature in the public school system, Laurence replied to Reverend Sam Buick's accusation of *The Diviners* of as being "unsavory pornography," which promoted "degradation, indecency and immorality" (Czarnecki 55), by saying that perhaps she "was possessed by an evil spirit," but she feels that her "writing is profoundly Christian–if it's not orthodox enough for them, tough beans" (Czarnecki 58).

The word "pagan," which is rooted in the Latin for "country-dweller," initially referred to people in general who, before Christianity, grounded their beliefs in the Greek pantheon or the worshipping of earth and her elements. Secular scholars posit that there is a human need to explain what is beyond human control, which is why gods of some sort are "created" in virtually every society. Others, within a religious belief system which includes organized worship, might argue that God has simply made him or her self manifest in different forms or has been perceived differently through the ages. In the Western world, pagan eventually became a label for anyone[4] who was not Christian and retains to this day a negative connotation.[5] In Laurence's African works, the respective narrators use the term "pagan" to refer to those who maintain their native system of beliefs, though sometimes the same people have publicly claimed allegiance to Christianity. It is not used to refer to those of the Muslim faith, which is commonly practiced in Africa. In the Manawaka works the word is rarely used by the narrators, but when it is, the connotation is of something ancient and unfettered, a kind of mystical, personal god or gods. I bring up the word in my discussion of the Manawaka works because I see a tendency in the female protagonists to move toward a kind of paganism in their desire to break with the God of their recent (100-200 years) ancestors in an effort to connect with the god/dess of their distant pasts (200-3000 years). The Tonnerre family, who appear regularly in the Manawaka works, combine their Native North American beliefs with French Catholicism, fashioning connective forces through which the protagonists become aware of their own ancestors.

There are several works which identify theological influences in Laurence's works. Evelyn J. Hinz, in her article "The Religious Roots of the Feminine Identity Issue: Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" (1987), points out how Laurence "dramatizes the extent to which religious ideology permeates even secular aspects of human existence"

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[4] While *pagan* often means "one who practices a faith outside of Christianity," it would exclude, in general usage, other strongly established religions such as Muslim or Buddhist.

[5] There is a current movement to reclaim the word *pagan* and to restore some positive nuance to its use, particularly among women who have perceived Christianity as having a negative impact on females, and environmentalists who believe that worshipping the earth may be a positive step towards improving our treatment of it.

(82), but, because she focuses on only one novel, does not explore the *changing* nature of the religious ideology presented. Leslie-Ann Hales discusses the similarity of the Manawaka protagonists' "tentative faith in God" (83) and their resulting sentence of isolation in her "Spiritual Longing in Laurence's Manawaka Women" (1985). She believes that because Laurence has stated that she does not "believe that God is totally dead" (Cameron 111-12), she is unable to write him out of her characters' lives. Gerald Cullen, in 1979, wrote his Master's thesis on "A Study of Metaphor, Symbolism, and Biblical Allusion in the Novels of Margaret Laurence," thereby recording how these elements "feature prominently in each novel and are an integral part of its organic unity" (iii). Sandra Djwa conducted a close study of the implications for Old Testament revelations in her "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross" (1972). These writings support my view of the pervasiveness of religious issues and imagery within Laurence's works. None, however, explores any progressively evolving deity, and none, with the exception of Hinz, gives any sustained consideration to the element of paganism within the Manawaka characters.

Laurence presents, in her memoir, the concept of "the female principle in faith, in art, in all of life" (15) as being part of "the Holy Spirit" (15) and claims that she is an "unorthodox" Christian. Indeed, her endorsement of the controversial "Crucified Woman" sculpture, by Canadian female sculptor Almuth Lutkenhaus, seems to support Evelyn Hinz' opinion of her as a "revisionist" (90) of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Hinz points to the "religious roots" of many struggles Laurence's protagonists face, and the need for *re-vision*. Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, Hinz calls a "revolutionist," more in keeping with Mary Daly's position that the Bible should be thrown out completely.

Ursula K. LeGuin offers this explanation:

> [The female principle] historically has been, basically anarchic. It values order without constraint, rule by custom not by force. It has been the male who enforces order, who constructs power structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws. (78)

Laurence conspicuously distances herself from the male order in her memoir, saying in her "forewords" that she is going to write about being a "mother and a writer," which she perceives as her most important contributions to humanity. Her focus on mothering–her "three mothers" and "countless foremothers" (*Dance* 19), to whom she dedicates her memoir–seems to support Barbara Godard's reading of her works as rewritings of the father texts, such as *Paradise Lost* and *The Tempest* ("Caliban's Revolt"), where the father archetype is replaced by a nurturing of independence, an attempt to give and replenish power. Godard says, "writing is parricide" ("Caliban" 208)–meaning that to re-write the past is to destroy the parent texts. Morag Gunn is the primary example of this. She, like Stacey MacAindra, becomes aware of the patronizing attitude of academic scholarship which silences, or refuses to hear, women's voices, or "herstory," a word Laurence uses in *Dance on the Earth*. Unlike Brooke Skeleton, who is completely incapable of recognizing the importance of a woman's story not just being *known*, but being *told*, Morag

journeys to a new place where she is not only capable of telling her story (both in re-telling Christie's and in re-writing her own), but where she can allow, even encourage, her daughter to do the same.

Kenneth C. Russell suggests that "not only are the language and the imagery drawn from Christian sources, but the moment of saving insight to which [Laurence's] heroines come bears a distinctly Christian character" ("Seekers" 46), and, furthermore, that the Old Testament is distinctly represented in her works: "Certainly punishment, reward, condemnation, and the emphasis on material blessings call to mind the chosen people rather than the New Testament community of Acts" ("God and Church" 438). Laurence admits that there is "a strong sense of the Old Testament" in her works, stemming from "the stern quality of [her] ancestors," but attests that there is also "the New Testament sense of hope" (Lever "Interview" 19). In a conversation with Robert Kroetsch she discusses the spiritual nature of "coming to terms with your roots and your ancestors and . . . with your gods" (48) through writing.

Hans Hauge, in his essay "Novel Religion of Margaret Laurence," says that "As a Protestant Laurence was easily familiar with a tension between art and religion, and it is this traditional tension which surfaces as a tension between art-as-order and religion-as-disorder" (126) in her works, and suggests that "If the churches cannot provide the dimension of meaning or a foundation [for Laurence], then perhaps the novel can" (127), thereby placing her novels as the solid ground on which she stands (and leans).

As well, Gerald Cullen, Melanie Mortlock, Miriam Ann Lancaster, and Anne Vimtrup have written academic theses on biblical imagery, allusion, and goddess discourse in the works. However, neither the academics nor the critics trace the religious influences through the works as a whole or track the progress of the imagery to a place where it is recreated in the feminine.

While Laurence certainly wrote other significant works–children's stories, literary criticism, journalistic essays, and a lengthy memoir–the seven works discussed in this project do represent all her *major* works of fiction. Each of the seven chapters of this project focuses on one major work of fiction by Laurence. They are arranged chronologically based on publication date reflecting what I believe is a progression in the protagonists' abilities to come to terms with their gods, both religious and societal ones, and to develop coping mechanisms which eventually grant personal power and perspicacious insight. I have resisted the temptation to align these works with other famous religious and philosophical "sevens," such as the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, the seven pillars of wisdom, or the seven days required, according to Genesis, to create the world.

My approach in exploring how Laurence's characters are empowered is to look closely at specific parts of the respective texts which relate to power, particularly as it pertains to religion. I attempt to see how the texts portray the relationship between the protagonists' religious beliefs (or disbeliefs) and their sense of power. I assume basic feminist tenets, such as the idea that we largely

"become"[6] women through socialization processes, but do not base my observations in general upon a particular feminist or theological theory. I do not participate in theoretical conflicts, although I do discuss how various theories illuminate certain aspects of the primary texts. I engage the critical estimates of numerous scholars, but they are usually not integral to my arguments which tend to focus more on the primary texts than on external explications. I aim to study Laurence's works from the inside, looking at the total structure with an attentiveness to detail and an awareness of critical scholarship.

Although the African works, discussed in Chapters One and Two, present nature as "peopled with a million ghosts, a million gods" (*Jordan* 105), which are sometimes referred to as the gods of the ancestors, they are more often called the gods of the *fathers*. And always there is a parallel god of Christianity, brought by men, taught by men, and with the Christ figure as the king, the redeemer. Likewise, in the Manawaka stories, all church representatives (ministers, priests) are male, soliciting worship of the male God. Even the internal dialogues that the female protagonists have with God position "him" as male.

Some Laurence scholars posit her African works as a kind of preliminary training for her "real" artistry as it is revealed in the Manawaka fiction. While I would agree that the African works may indeed be a springboard for some of her later works, they are also a landing place: the Manawaka fiction may elaborate themes first explored in *This Side Jordan* and *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, but they ultimately come back to them as well: colonization through religion; history as a source of strength; and, ultimately, acts of creation as ways to rewrite history. While the African stories present a polytheistic society in which many different gods are called upon for help, personal power is rarely achieved. Nathaniel, in fact, may be stronger when he recognizes the *dis*integration of his gods in a dream: "I called upon my gods . . . . I knew my gods would not answer, for they were dead. My gods were dead in me" (75).

While it is the African, Nathaniel, whom Laurence portrays as the one most in conflict with his religious beliefs in *This Side Jordan*, it is Miranda, the expatriate white wife, who is most curious and intent on learning about the distinctly un-Christian practices of the Ghanaians. Like Laurence, who spent several years in Ghana, she is the conspicuous outsider intrigued by a system in which she cannot possibly partake. She desires the forbidden knowledge of the fetish huts, perhaps because she sees some female power in the native structures that is unavailable to her in the English churches. Although in this novel the lives of the women, Aya and Miranda, are secondary to the main characters, their respective black and white husbands, Nathaniel and Johnnie, all four of them are forced to question their inherited religious beliefs. Nathaniel is given the burden of two systems, both of which seem to drain his power rather than enhance it. By naming his son Joshua in the final pages of

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[6] Simone DeBeauvoir mothered this concept in *The Second Sex* (1953), saying that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

the novel, he attempts to pass on to his progeny a sense of belonging and empowerment that he never attained for himself.

The short-story collection *The Tomorrow-Tamer* focuses even less than *This Side Jordan* on women's lives, with only three of the ten stories having female protagonists ("The Rain Child," "A Fetish for Love, "and "A Gourdful of Glory") and one other having a significant female secondary character ("The Perfume Sea"). This lack of female stories seems reflective of Laurence's discomfort with exploring the lives of women and perhaps also of the availability of women's lives for her observation during her tenure in Africa. In any case, the religious explorations seem to take place in the stories populated with men, while the stories that focus on women delve into personal relationships and struggles for power within their societal, rather than their religious or political, structures. It is significant that the collection ends with "A Gourdful of Glory," a story depicting Mammii Ama, the "petty trader," and her auspicious rejection of her colonial dependence. Overall, the collection examines power structures and struggles, often centered on religious beliefs, within the personal lives of the characters. It is here, as in *This Side Jordan*, that Laurence seems to explore the possibilities of faith beyond Christianity that appear later in *The Diviners*. The most striking feature of the stories which focus on religious issues (though they all do to some extent) is how Christianity becomes assimilated in the polytheistic belief system, instead of replacing it as the missionaries expect.

In *The Stone Angel* we see a leap by the author from trying to narrate as an exiled outsider–one of different race, language, and sex–to almost mystically inhabiting the character of a woman whose heritage and physiology were profoundly familiar to Laurence. The religious conflict in this novel concerns whether or not Hagar can embrace Christianity, which is presented as the only possible belief system for connecting with the power of God. The church structure is clearly defined, and Hagar's choices about whether or not to enter into it are highly influenced by her own inner sense of integrity and her perception of what kind of God she feels would be worthy of worship. She is not under the power of this system to the extent that Nathaniel or Kofi are, not emotionally tormented or terrorized, but she is aware that her choices are limited and resents that she may have to participate in the only belief system with which she is presented, one which she sees as laden with hypocrisy. Hagar's eventual descent to Shadow Point and her resulting transformation allow her finally to receive and to bestow "grace" among a community of women, thus planting the seed for further reconstructions of the spirit in the rest of the Manawaka works.

In *A Jest of God* Rachel breaks with some of the religious traditions of her mother's (and Hagar's) generation, perhaps most notably in an involuntary trance brought on at an Evangelical gathering which she attends against her better judgment. Rachel's speaking in tongues is a manifestation of her greatest fears–perhaps someone or something other than herself is in control of her body and her words. While Rachel's story is to a large extent revealed through her inner dialogues–her conversations with herself–she usually does not label the judgmental and oppressive voices in her head as God. She still sees

religion as something outside herself and resents her need, her desire, to have a God when her intellect tells her he does not exist. But like Hagar, she makes an important physical descent (besides the one into her subconscious tongues)--in this case into the basement of a funeral home--and emerges somehow changed and is able to give "blessings" to those she felt oppressed her. Her transformation from a meek, school-marm-spinster into a raging "prophetess" marks one more step in the mutation of power, moving from the hairy reptilian hands of her principal, Mr. Siddley, to her own "fingers like pencils" (209) which may write a new script.

Stacey, however, Rachel's sister and the protagonist of *The Fire-Dwellers*, does perceive the voice in her head as God, and addresses it as such. Like Nathaniel, she recognizes the interdependence of humans and those they choose to worship. Stacey is conscious of the potency of the religious history she has been handed and how it influences her husband's hostility towards her, going "back and back forever," perhaps originating in "our father Adam" (155). Her constant attempts to make pacts with God reveal her awareness of her lack of power in a society where men, like gods, hold all the political and economic clout and must constantly be bargained with, perhaps especially when protection is required: "Listen god, I didn't mean it. Just don't let anything terrible happen to any of them will you? . . . I wasn't meaning to complain. I never will again. I promise" (76). That Stacey must beg for protection from the very being who may himself be threatening the harm is indicative of the failings of the entire patriarchal structure to provide safe and creative space for women. But she does have a speaking relationship with God, and one could argue that she *becomes* God in the sense that all her conversations with *him*, are actually with *herself*. More importantly, she recognizes the parallels between herself as mother--the creator of life upon whom her children must depend for guidance and protection--and God.

A Bird in the House re-states the conventional and the un-conventional perceptions and actions within the realm of Christianity, while suggesting the possibility of a mystical power beyond the masculine archetype that presents itself in the other Manawaka fiction. Through Noreen, the protagonist's baby-sitter, we see glimpses of the African priestess. Even the title of the collection breaks with the biblical references inherent in *The Stone Angel, A Jest of God*, and *The Fire-Dwellers*. The story of the actual "Bird in the House" is based on a folk tale, a superstition, in which Noreen predicts the death of Vanessa's father, contributing to Vanessa's loss of faith in the teachings of the church fathers. She sees no benefit in believing in a nasty god, and is frightened by the power Noreen seems to have in making direct contact with him. Vanessa's role of ultimate power as the narrator of these stories is evidence of the beneficial effects of the child having moved (figuratively speaking) away from the Christian fathers and into a world where women are the spiritual centers.

The Diviners, in its title and its text, subverts Christianity. Contained in the title is the epithet usually used to describe a religious deity (*divine* Christ), but the word strongly connotes supernatural qualities attributable to humans--a diviner *foretells* through intuition, or *finds* underground rivers in a manner unexplainable by science. While fetishism, rune words, and trinket charms are

mentioned in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and Noreen is called a sorceress in *A Bird in the House*, there is no elaboration of a belief system which can incorporate these concepts into the lives of the heroines until *The Diviners*, where Morag seems to nurture her spirit successfully and find personal power through a combination of magic, divinity, historic re-visioning, *author*ship, Christianity, and polytheism. In this story the heroine achieves true integrity–struggling with gods has given way to embracing them, and there is a clear manifestation of what Laurence calls "the female principle of faith" (*Dance* 15), including the recreation of the overbearing masculine image of God into a pioneering woman.

Paradoxically, the progressive re-visioning of a god/dess who might empower the protagonists is both linear and circular. In the African works, the idea of a deity (or deities) outside of Christian tradition is introduced. The five works of Manawaka fiction show a persistent awareness of and communication with the Christian god, which develops from being an untouchable outside force to an integrated entity. The final images of divinity seem to abide in nature and acts of creation, which recollect the polytheistic systems commonly found in Africa.

Who the hell do you pray to, I wonder, when you want to live and there isn't any God?

Noah's wife (Findley, *Not Wanted*, 182)

Religions are born and may die, but superstition is immortal. Only the fortunate can take life without mythology.

Ariel Durant (243)

Chapter 1
This Side Jordan

In this chapter I will discuss Laurence's narrative choices and consider some of the influences, including religious ones, which led to her writing *This Side Jordan* (1960) from a mainly male perspective. I will look at how the routine criticisms of the novel concern themselves with the theme of colonialism and birthing of a new nation, as opposed to the religious systems which seem to me to be the primary site of conflict, and how Laurence explores the strength of inherited belief systems, using the polytheistic African tradition as a foil for imposed Christianity, while ultimately showing them both as failing to empower the protagonists. In fact, both religions severely restrict the African protagonist, eroding his freedom of action and of thought. Finally, I will show how the main female characters seek affinity and power in the "pagan" [1] system, even though they are officially Christians, thus setting the stage for Laurence's future protagonists.

This Side Jordan is Laurence's first, and least read, novel. Like several other Laurence works, it opens with a song, [2] "the Fire Highlife. . . with a beat as urgent as love" (1). The dance theme, and the intermingling of separate bodies and ideas moving to the same tune, comes full circle with Laurence's

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[1] I use the word "pagan" here, and throughout Chapters 1 and 2, in the same way the narrators usually use it in *This Side Jordan* and *The Tomorrow-Tamer*: it is basically synonymous with the native tribal belief system of a polytheistic faith which attributes power and animation to objects of nature (e.g. sky, stone) as well as the gods associated with those objects.

[2] *A Jest of God* (skipping song); *The Fire-Dwellers* (nursery rhyme); *A Bird in the House* (first story titled "The Sound of the Singing"); also, her memoir, *Dance on the Earth*, is named after a line in the hymn "Lord of the Dance" (*Dance* 16).

memoir, so appropriately titled *Dance on the Earth* (1987). It is generally considered, as George Woodcock puts it in his "Afterword," "a 'well-made' book rather neatly arranged" (285). The story follows two couples, one African and one English, on the Gold Coast (now Ghana), where, "with a touch of rather obvious symbolism, Aya and Miranda have children in time to anticipate the birth of the new state" (Woodcock, "Afterword" 285). While the story is told by an omniscient narrator, mostly from the viewpoint of the two husbands, Nathaniel and Johnnie, it reaches deepest into Nathaniel, the struggling African school teacher, whose character is revealed not only through his dreams, but in his waking subconscious as well, where words and rhythms pound without formal structure or clear linear definition. In this first novel the dance beat is pervasive and primal throughout the text, particularly where the juxtaposition of polytheistic and Christian religions and mythologies takes place, as shown in Nathaniel's stream-of-consciousness thoughts:

> My soul wrestled with the devil in the night. The devil of the night. My soul wrestled with Sasabonsam in the night. His fur was black and his fur was red and his face was a grinning mask of rage.(74)

Although William New believes that the narrator's inside knowledge of the African natives in *This Side Jordan* is insufficient "to convince us of the Africa they tell us about" ("Other" 127), Fiona Sparrow disagrees, saying that "New underestimates [Laurence's] knowledge of the history and traditions of the peoples of the Gold Coast, which she incorporates into her fiction with remarkable success" (*Into Africa* 101). Sparrow points out that the source material Laurence cites at the beginning of *This Side Jordan* alone–several books on Akran death, art, and religion–certainly give her the scholarly qualifications, while the years she spent in Africa give her personal insight.

Laurence was keenly aware in her later life of the significance of her narrative choices for this novel, and other writings, especially where they concerned culture and gender. She tells in her *Memoir* how she "cringe[d] with shame to recall" (5) her first story published under a male pseudonym. From this she moved to being able to sign her works *J.M. Wemyss*. She recalls with horror how, "In one of [her] early stories, published in the United College Magazine, *Vox*, [she] actually used a first person narrative, but the narrator was a man" (5), an anecdote which could refer to several stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, as well as some passages in *This Side Jordan*. In this respect, Laurence follows a long-standing female tradition springing from the realization that serious critical consideration would be denied if the gender of the author is too soon revealed as female.[3] Laurence's hesitancy about writing in a woman's voice in her early work stems from her awareness that "writing by women. . . was generally regarded by critics and reviewers . . . with at best amused tolerance, at worst a dismissive shrug" (*Dance* 5). George Woodcock points out in his "Afterword" to *This Side Jordan* that "we actually see everything through the alternating viewpoints of the two leading male characters" (285).

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[3] Such writers as Emily and Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Mary Shelley kept their gender under wraps until their works, assumed to be written by men, were fairly well established.

Laurence is angry in her later life that she felt she had to speak from a male perspective in order to be taken seriously. Commenting on *This Side Jordan*, she says:

> I described the birth of Miranda Kestoe's child from the point of view of Johnnie Kestoe, the child's father. How could I have done? How could I have been so stupid, so self-doubting? . . . At that point I had borne two children, but women writers had virtually no models in describing birth, or sex, from a woman's view. (*Dance* 5-6)

The result, then, of absence of models is often absence of art. If we assume the adage that art reflects life, those of us whose lives rarely appear in art become somehow invisible, even to ourselves. As women, we see ourselves reflected through male eyes to the extent that our self-image is actually one constructed by "the other". And Johnnie Kestoe's construction of his wife giving birth certainly portrays woman from an alienated position:

> She was no longer human. The voice that came from her throat was an animal's coarse voice. Then a jagged scream, the last cry. Johnnie put his head down on his outspread hands. He closed his eyes. He was shivering, as though with shock. Whatever unspeakable thing had come forth, he did not want to see it. (266)

From his perspective, she becomes an animal, and the "unspeakable thing" that issues forth is not the dead son he expects, but "a girl, and she was quite alive" (266). Laurence's fears as a female writer are affirmed by the critic who complains about the "obligatory birth scenes in novels written by women" (*Dance* 6).

This Side Jordan has not received the critical acclaim that the Manawaka novels have. It is, however, in Patricia Morley's words, "a sensitive portrait of social change in West Africa" (*Long Journey* 34). For Laurence, "It was the easiest novel I ever wrote because I knew absolutely nothing about writing a novel" (*Dance* 152). It was also one of her first experiences of being a kind of conduit for a story being revealed to her rather than consciously invented: "I scribbled on and on, as though a voice were telling me what to write down" (*Dance* 152). Ironically, while writing this work with such insight into the colonization of a nation, Laurence had the luxury, for the only time in her writing career, of having "a great deal of help with domestic chores" (*Dance* 152). While she claims later that she "didn't want to be privileged," she admits that she "accepted this [help]," albeit "with enormous guilt" (*Dance* 152). Though at some level one could accuse Laurence of exploiting the natives who became her servants, thereby taking on the role of colonizer herself, if a parallel is drawn between this and the typical western world male author, whose wife often looks after the "domestic chores" and assumes a nurturing role, we would realize how rare a thing it would be for him to feel any guilt at all about such a position of privilege; in fact, he would most likely assume it to be the proper order. For example, Laurence's husband, Jack, had much less of a problem getting used to servants, and "tried to explain," when she protested at being served by a young black "houseboy," that "This isn't Winnipeg or London. You don't tote your own luggage here. It just isn't

done" (*Prophet* 23).

We know from Laurence's travel writings, published as *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), that she was unusually sensitive to some of the negative aspects of colonialism and was far ahead of her time in criticizing it. She claims to "have never in [her] life felt such antipathy towards people anywhere as [she] felt towards these pompous or whining sahibs and memsahibs" (Prophet 228)–these being the white men and women who took voluntary exile in Africa, all the while denouncing its people and believing themselves to be inherently superior. Laurence later feels a "shock of recognition" when she reads "Mannoni's description of the dependence complex in *The Psychology of Colonization*" (*Prophet* 208), which, using Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a model, proposes that

> Prospero and Caliban have been and are still playing out their conflicting roles wherever the colonizers and the colonized conjoin–Prospero, the European, surrounding himself with dependents in order to assuage his own inferiority complex: Caliban, the primitive, attaching himself soul and all to his absolute white master, until at least that late twentieth-century moment when he rounds on his love-hated mentor and cries "You taught me the language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse." ("Knowing How" 218)

While her contempt for the system does not preclude her participation in it, she does not feel comfortable in her role. James King, in his 1997 biography of Laurence, says that she "had thought some sort of assimilation between colonials and colonized could be reached," but that "her experience in the Gold Coast destroyed that naive assumption" (*The Life* 117). King also discusses the irony of how Laurence's heavy drinking and smoking began in Africa, the same place where her writing began to take shape.

The struggle that most critics observe when discussing *This Side Jordan* focuses on the struggle between the upcoming freedom and the relatively secure but oppressive colonization that seems to prevent it. While colonization today is widely considered immoral, it was, earlier in this century, seen by many as a way to "help" what are called, patronizingly, "underdeveloped" countries. The reason the Laurences were there in the first place was to perform such a helpful deed: the construction of massive water containers in the desert. Though Laurence believes that she captures the English characters better than the African ones, "even though [her] sympathy with colonial Europeans was certainly minimal or even non-existent" ("Gadgetry" 3-4), Johnnie and Miranda seem to have less depth and realistic idiosyncrasy than Nathaniel and Aya. Chinua Achebe and Clara Thomas point out that "to Africans Margaret Laurence would be a respected fiction writer, critic and translator even if she had never written one of her Manawaka works" (Thomas, "*Morning Yet* " 93). Thomas is, of course, referring to Laurence's translations of Somali poetry, *A Tree for Poverty* (1954), the short-story collection *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963), the travel journal, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), and the literary criticism of *Long Drums and Cannons* (1968), as well as the novel *This Side Jordan* (1960). Achebe credits Laurence

with presenting a balanced view of Africa, making it "neither idyllic, as the views of some nationalists would have had it, nor barbaric, as the missionaries and European administrators wished and needed it to be" (qtd. by Thomas, 93). Donez Xiques agrees, saying in her "Introduction" to *A Tree for Poverty* that "Somalis speak of her with admiration and affection and regard her as one of their great friends" (9). Laurence is conscious, however, that she was sometimes "unwittingly condescending, in the manner of white liberals" ("Preface" to *A Tree*, 19).

Miranda sums up nicely the sympathetic liberal dilemma when Johnnie rebukes her for being too agreeable to Nathaniel: "I suppose one does tend to agree too much, to prove sympathy. To me that's the real meaning of white man's burden–the accumulated guilt, something we've inherited–" (54). This sense of guilt appears again with Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* when she meets Valentine Tonnerre, now a drug addict and a prostitute on the streets of Vancouver, and realizes that "Even her presence is a reproach to me, for all I've got now and have been given. . . . The debts are inherited" (*Fire* 265). Of course, the colonization of Canada and its natives was well established long before Laurence saw it through different eyes in Africa. Miranda may well be, as Barbara Pell suggests, "a recreation, really, of Laurence herself in Ghana" (4).

Colonization has its own long-standing tradition in English literature. Shakespeare's *Tempest*, perhaps the ultimate colonizing script, provides Laurence with a prototype for her innocent and too-friendly-to-the-natives Miranda, a reference that comes full circle in her last novel, *The Diviners*. In an interview with Rosemary Sullivan, Laurence confirms the Shakespearean connection: "[The British] had to go like Prospero to a place in which they had a built-in, in a sense magical, advantage . . . . To me Prospero is a very sinister character" (67).

While most of the criticism of *This Side Jordan* focuses on the colonization and "birthing" of a nation, it all but ignores what I see as the true conflict of the novel, which is Nathaniel's struggle with the old (pagan) gods and the new (Christian) one, and how this struggle between polytheism and monotheism affects his ability to see clearly and act directly. Also neglected is the concept of woman as colonized within the patriarchal structures of the western "old world" (Europe and England) and the "new world" (North America). Laurence describes herself in Africa as "young and full of faith" ("Ten Years" 19), incapable yet of exploring the depth to which gods and politics affect the female characters. Miranda and Aya are not given the depth of character that their husbands, Johnnie and Nathaniel are; they act as foils against which the males are more thoroughly revealed. And they are kept well under check by their husbands in both their curiosities and their actions regarding worship. Johnnie consistently groans over Miranda's attempts to discover more information about the pagan systems, a structure that doubtless appeals to her because it seems to grant women some power in both the medical and the spiritual worlds. Aya is forbidden to practice the rituals that would give her comfort or peace during her pregnancy because Nathaniel insists that only the new practices–the sterile hospital and the sterile Christ–are

valid. Patricia Morley calls *This Side Jordan* an "apprentice novel," after which "Laurence's central characters are female" (*Long Journey* 93).

Because of Nathaniel's contradictory religious upbringing–i.e. the pagan gods of his early childhood, followed by the Christian ones at school–he is forever in a state of turmoil, guilt and anger. When, at eighteen, he returns to his home village for his father's funeral, he is confronted with these irreconcilable forces. The whole scene surrounding the funeral is steeped in the rhythm of "the dead Drummer." Laurence animates and personifies objects when depicting them within the context of Nathaniel's home village:

> The drummer's drum was silent, and the drums mourned. . . . And Nathaniel fasted and drank palm-wine and listened to the funeral songs for the dead Drummer, his father.
>
> Somewhere there was another god [sic], not Nyame, not Nyankopor. . . . Somewhere there was another–God [sic]. But He was far away. The Latin words were far away, and the altar and the wine-blood and the wafer that was a broken body. They were far away and Nathaniel had come home. (30)

Nathaniel follows the customs of his people, but is aware of the commitment he has made to the "other" God-with-a-capital-"G." His uncles are impressed with his behavior, saying, "They have not stolen your soul, Nathaniel, the white priests" (30). This, however, instead of providing the comfort intended, only creates waves of anxiety: "And the boy had agreed, his aching body sweating and trembling lest the lie should strangle him and lest his father's gods should hear and slay him" (31). Nathaniel is terrified of both the big-G and the little-g gods. He knows that the priests have indeed "stolen [his] soul" and relegated it to the Christian god; at the same time he fears his father's gods may hear of his betrayal and slay him. Clearly, he believes in them as well, or he would not be afraid, for, not only is the Christian god jealous, but the pagan ones are as well. Nathaniel has assimilated the Christian god among the others. However, the Old Testament words are indelibly etched in his brain: "I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God" (31). The Christian god is a classic insecure male. He proclaims himself shamelessly as "jealous," thus revealing a fear of being displaced by another.

It is in many ways irrelevant, then, which god is selected as the most powerful: they all want complete devotion and threaten earthly death or torment in the afterlife if not obeyed. Only the chosen and/or the obedient will have peace on or off the earth. This reflects a basic systematic kind of classism and upholds the most negative aspects of what Laurence refers to as "tribalism," something she believes "is an inheritance of us all":

> Where tribalism becomes, to my mind, frighteningly dangerous is where the tribe–whatever it is, the Hausa, the Ibo, the Scots Presbyterians, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the in-group–is seen as "the people," the human beings, and the others, the un-tribe, are seen as sub-human. This is not Africa's problem alone; it is everyone's. ("Ten Years" 20)

Christian missionaries used fear and the separation of gods not to

empower the natives, but to empower the church. If the pagan gods could not be eradicated in the minds of the masses, then making the new god a jealous one was one way of instilling fear if the others continued residence in one's soul. The pagan gods seem capable of living peacefully among one another, but they too seem jealous of the "new" god. Obviously, one belief system had to go. Nathaniel is afraid of all the gods. None of them grant him any power; rather, he feels his life threatened by all of them. He does not "believe" out of any consciousness or "reason" other than fear of punishment. He is like an abused wife. He is angry. And his anger must all be internalized if he is to be safe at all.

Back at the mission, after his father's funeral, Nathaniel stands alone in the church, "before the statue of God's crucified Son. And he had spat full in the Thing's face. . . . But it did not work. For he believed in the man-god with the bleeding hands, and he could not spew that out of himself" (31-2). Christ has taken up residence in his body and cannot be expelled. Nathaniel believes nine years later that neither god/s won in the battle over his soul (32). He thinks he is ruled by neither, but he still has "never been brave enough to burn either Nyame's Tree or the Nazarene's Cross" (32).

Laurence's awareness of the lasting effects of ritual and worship is deep-seated. She says in an interview that "one thing that impressed me about African life . . . was the whole sense of the richness of the rituals. But don't forget that I had come myself from a culture in which ritual was important" (Sullivan 67). Her recognition of the rituals is not one of shock at the difference, but awareness of the similarities to her own Christian tradition.[4]

Johnnie Kestoe, Nathaniel's European counterpart, is also deeply affected by his childhood rearing, not in the ghost-filled forests of the Gold Coast, but in London's Roman Catholic tradition. He remembers especially the scene surrounding the death of his Irish mother, Mary, who bled to death after a botched, self-induced abortion when Johnnie was a child: he had watched "the red stain spread and spread on the quilt," while she "cursed and prayed by turns" (58). He listened to "the sacred and profane words tangled together in a new hoarse cry. . . 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph, assist me in my last agony'" (58). The irony of Johnnie's mother, Mary, calling on Christ's mother, also Mary, is striking. She is, in effect, calling on herself for strength. When the priest finally arrives to find her body, he questions Johnnie intensely on whether Mary had made "an Act of Contrition? Think carefully, Johnnie–did she say these exact words? Did she say 'O my God, I am sorry for having offended Thee'" (59). Johnnie says he thinks she did, then, like Nathaniel, is shocked

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[4] This similarity is an observation American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-87) also makes in his works *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (1949) and *Masks of God* (1967), which explore how religions and hero quests of different cultures worldwide often follow very similar patterns. Likewise, the theories of Carl Jung (1875-1961) posit that there exists among all humanity a "collective unconscious" which often produces archetypes manifested in our myths, religions and fairy tales. Laurence's letters (Wainwright) suggest a familiarity with these ideas, as her works demonstrate their manifestation.

that God does not immediately punish him: "No flaming sword descended to cut him down for the lie" (60). He also worries about how his actions affect the soul of his dead parent, just as Nathaniel does. Johnnie feels that what his mother spoke "were not words either of obscenity or prayer" (60). Ironically, Mary's call to the church for assistance is a call to the power that put her life at risk in the first place with its strict rules against birth control.

While Johnnie finds much to puzzle over in his religious traditions, he is not given optional gods, as Nathaniel is, to fill all the gaps. He resolves his religious conflict by simply cutting out his nightly prayer to "the Mother of God" (60). One can hardly help paralleling the "Mother of God" with his own mother. In any case, that he could not stop dreaming of her, even though he stops invoking her name, shows the power of the unconscious to refuse removal of such strongly instilled belief systems. So, while Johnnie is conscious, at some level, of religious conflict, he does not have to deal daily with godly disputes, as Nathaniel does. And as far as the power of God goes, he is keenly aware that his mother's prayers were not answered.

The scene of the woman tarnished, one might say punished, for her sexuality, is echoed when Johnnie has violent sex with a teenage "African whore" (229), who, due to her clitoridectomy and virginity, lies in a pool of blood "seeping into the quilt" (232) after the incident. Upon seeing this, his self-centeredness momentarily leaves him as he almost tenderly covers her with her cloth, then drives out of the city and "sobbed as he had not done for nearly twenty years" (234), which would be about the time of his mother's death in hauntingly similar circumstances. While there is no mention of Johnnie contemplating God's opinion during this episode, the girl does speak in a "low rhythmical keening sound" which implies prayer, not unlike his mother's death-bed ranting.

It is little wonder that Nathaniel is confused when he tries to use religious teachings, the morals of the higher and wiser beings, to help him in making moral decisions. This creates spiritual conflict. When his ornery neighbor, Ankrah, stabs the tailor Yiamoo in an argument, Ankrah tries to talk Nathaniel out of reporting the incident to the police: "Does a man betray his brother? Do you think the spirits of your ancestors would give you any rest, ever again, if you did a thing like that?" (112-13). The technique of persuasion here is well structured: follow tradition, and fear the gods. The argument is not what is right or wrong, but what will elicit the least punishment from the ancestor-gods. The paralleling of gods and ancestors is a constant theme in both the African and the Manawaka works.

Trying to incorporate the teachings of his dual (and dueling) spiritualities to help make a decision only seems to complicate matters further for Nathaniel:

> –the 'asamanfo,' the spirits of the dead speak in every whisper of the breeze through the nimm branches. The voice of the Drummer. My son, my son. I was betrayed in your heart–must I now be betrayed again and again? (113)

And then comes the Christian father voice:

> –Jesus said, love thy neighbour as thyself. Nathaniel, love thy neighbour Yiamoo as thy self. And Jesus said, one of you shall betray Me. (113)

Nathaniel's dilemma is focused on choosing which god to listen to and which to betray:

> –Choose. Must a man always betray one god or the other? Both gods have fought over me, and sometimes it seems both have lost, sometimes that both have won and I am the unwilling bondsman of two masters. (113)

It does not seem to occur to Nathaniel that he may betray himself–always it is the gods who must be appeased and listened to, even against his conscious will. As the "unwilling bondsman of two masters," he will always incur someone's wrath, though it is unclear exactly which voice was listened to in this case, or if indeed they are actually giving the same advice. He agrees not to go to the police. In this way he seems to be appeasing both gods–the one who bids him not to betray his neighbour, and the one that tells him to love his neighbour. As a "bondsman," the idea of self-empowerment is not even an issue. Both religions act to bind him, not to free him. Both are inside of him, but neither helps him to feel integrity or a sense of peace. Towards the end of the novel Nathaniel repeats his dilemma that "[he] cannot have both gods and [he] cannot have neither" (275), but with an interesting departure. He begins to pray not to the "Father," but to the "ebony Madonna. . . . serene with love, the Mother of all men" (274), thus laying the groundwork for the development of a female god as an alternative to the warring master(s) in the later Manawaka works.

Twenty-two years after *This Side Jordan* was published, Margaret Laurence talked about the potency of "Our Lord's new commandment," which she believes speaks very clearly: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self" ("Statement" 56). It is significant that she refers to the *new* commandment, thus placing her faith clearly in the New Testament, which focuses on the one "loving" god, as opposed to the Old Testament, which contains the Ten Commandments and often presents God as an angry and vengeful tyrant. Obviously, Laurence is herself ruled to some degree by her religious upbringing.

Still, Nathaniel constantly feels guilty about turning his back on the old ways, and mourns the loss of the pagan gods: "I mourn everything I have lost. I mourn the gods strangled by my hand" (73). Laurence seems to feel the same way about turning away from some of her childhood beliefs, saying that she "mourns [her] disbelief" (Cameron 112) of the early Christian hymns and morality. She says in her memoir that when she sings "Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven," she feels "left out, deprived" (14-15) even though she loves the music.

What Laurence portrays in this novel is the existence of conflict in religious beliefs and just how deeply the battle lines are drawn. Like Nathaniel, she realizes the pains of colonization, of breathing someone else's belief system, of waking up to assimilation:

> The city of strangers is your city, and the God of conquerors is your god,

> and strange speech is in your mouth, and you have no home.
> (*Jordan* 167)

The religious conflict holds true to the very end of the novel, which closes with Nathaniel's reflections as he looks at his newborn son:

> He glanced at his son, and the name kept beating through his mind like all the drums of Ghana.
>
> –Joshua, Joshua, Joshua. I beg you. Cross Jordan, Joshua. (282)

That Joshua, biblically the son of Moses, is somehow drummed into existence, and asked to "Cross Jordan" makes a delightful play on words. The invocation could be for him to bring home the tribe of Israel, as the Bible would have it or, perhaps subconsciously on Nathaniel's part, it could be for him to "cross" in the sense of oppose or intersect the Christian influence. In any case, it appears that the father is trying to empower the son, and has hopes for him to become what the father could not–a leader for, or a fighter of, his inheritance, or both.

Throughout this novel there is a strong sense of discord with the religious entities. There is no conscious or willful integration of the god/s and the humans, but rather a series of powerful outside entities which threaten and torment the African characters. There seems no avenue here for a relationship with God which invites independence or trust. That Nathaniel names his son Joshua, the biblical successor to Moses as the leader of Israel, indicates that in this novel Christianity has won the battle within Nathaniel. At a conscious level he has made a decision to embrace the gods of another culture in hopes that the power of that tradition will give his son strengths and abilities that were unavailable to Nathaniel. In the final scene after naming Joshua, his father holds him up high and contemplates his future:

> Someone crossed that River and won that battle. Someone took that city and made it his.
>
> 'You'll know what to do with it, boy, won't you?' he said softly, pleadingly. 'You'll know how to make it work. You'll know how to make it all go well.' (281)

Obviously, Nathaniel has not known how to make "it" work, and has not had a helpful relationship with his gods to aid in his peace or his understanding. What this novel shows above all is the uselessness of a god or gods when the power they wield is based on making one obedient out of fear. As we progress through Laurence's novels and stories, we will see that this one stands alone in its representation of one who is paralyzed by his fear of the gods and unable to be creative in any way except procreation.

Nathaniel's wife, Aya, though a sworn Christian, remains strongly drawn to the pagan beliefs, especially where it concerns her pregnancy. When Aya tells Nathaniel of her friend Charity going to the fetish priest for fertility potions, he admonishes her:

> That's enough. She's a Baptist and a pagan, and she hasn't even the decency to stick to one pagan god. She's like a woman in the market–which piece of fish is the cheapest, the freshest? Which god shall I buy today? (68)

It bothers Nathaniel that a god is treated like a commodity, to be bought or bribed with money or other material offerings. Interestingly though, this is often the basis of favor or redemption in the Christian church, as well as in the pagan one. The relationship between religion and materialism is explored further in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* and the Manawaka works.

While Aya enjoys "the evangelical church she attend[s] with her women friends" (107), she does not sees Jesus as "The Redeemer"; rather, she humanizes him to the a point where he truly seems to be a fellow being rather than a god: "'That Jesus,' she would say, clucking her tongue in soft sympathy, 'that poor boy'" (107). She would comfort Jesus instead of asking or needing him to comfort her. Though Aya appears to accede to her husband's wishes regarding religious and medical matters, it is clear that she has fortified Christianity with the religion of her ancestors. Nathaniel suspects as much, asking her,

> "What 'suman' did you try . . . when you thought you couldn't hold a baby? . . . . And when you were pregnant. . . . I suppose you saw the 'sumankwafo' to get charms so no one could harm the child by witchcraft–" (68)

Obviously, Aya feels that she gets more power from the pagan sources than from the Christian ones; she is certainly unwilling to forgo them where the development and safety of her fetus are concerned.

Similarly, Miranda is drawn to the pagan system which Nathaniel is so eager to leave behind. She insists that he accompany her down a "blind alley" of the market so she can see the fetish images, which she finds "tremendously interesting":

> Miranda's fingers, eager, alert, touched, touched, touched.
>
> What was it made some Europeans behave this way when they came in contact with these piles of rotten bones? What was it made them want to touch, touch, touch, and stare–as though to remember a past that was for them so comfortingly long ago?
>
> "What's this?" she cried. "How do they work? How do they make ju-ju out of them?" (157-158)

The suggestion that Miranda is consecrating her own past through touching these bones suggests that her personal ancestry is somehow tied to these objects through a common genealogy, which would place her as relative to all earth's objects instead of merely the mortals of her bloodline, as Western history and science would indicate.

If, as Morley suggests, "Africa was catalyst and crucible for much of Laurence's work" ("Early" 14), and I believe it was, then we can see in Aya and Miranda, even as underdeveloped characters, both the identification with Christ on a personal level and the desire, even *need*, for unity with a force outside of the Christian tradition which places the women in contact with a spirit capable of embracing and empowering people and things outside of the male lineage. This theme continues to develop in Laurence's Manawaka heroines who show similar needs and desires and seek to fulfill them beyond the parameters of the status quo.

Oh senseless man, who cannot possibly make a worm, and yet will make Gods by dozens.

Michel de Montaigne

Natives who beat drums to drive off evil spirits are objects of scorn to smart Americans who blow horns to break up traffic jams.

Mary Ellen Kelly (245)

Chapter 2
The Tomorrow-Tamer

In *The Tomorrow-Tamer* stories, all set in Ghana, we see fully Laurence's recognition of the profound and paradoxical effects of religious and ritualistic influences upon the thoughts and actions of the characters, who range from a Christian missionary to an oracle dwarf, all of whom must come to terms with the power within their inherited belief systems. That Laurence brings these themes to play so consistently shows her awareness of their impact on everyday life. The stories are what Sandra Djwa calls "parables of salvation or the failure to attain it" (72). There is, however, some indication in this collection of a possibility for integration between the pagan and Christian doctrines, which seems utterly absent in *This Side Jordan*. In fact, Christianity ultimately becomes assimilated within the tribal belief systems instead of replacing them as the missionaries anticipate, thus creating new possibilities for faith which seem invisible to the Christians. The importance of creating stories as a way of understanding the world and carving out one's place in it is also a major thread in this collection.

That Laurence provides female protagonists in only three of the ten stories ("The Rain Child," "A Fetish for Love," and "A Gourdful of Glory") demonstrates her continued discomfort with telling women's stories, especially as they pertain to religious struggle, though the heroines she presents do attempt to come to terms with their power, or lack thereof, within societal structures. I have selected the four most anthologized stories in the collection for my study because they are the ones which deal most directly with religious

issues and mythology. They are "The Drummer of All the World," "The Merchant of Heaven," "The Tomorrow-Tamer," and "Godman's Master."

While Christl Verduyn comments, in her introduction to the collection *Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation*, on Laurence's "search for spiritual freedom" (5), she does not look directly at how religion stifles or encourages this pursuit. In a conversation with Robert Kroetsch, Laurence discusses the necessity of "coming to some kind of terms . . . with your gods" (47). There is an awareness in all of the stories that there exists some form of God. In "The Perfume Sea" Doree is protected from "lethal guests" (of the many-legged sort) by her "faith" (32), though we are not told faith in *what*. And her companion, Mr. Archipelago, recognizes that some god, beyond himself, is the only one fit to judge true beauty: "Am I God, that I should judge a creature?" (33). "The Rain Child" offers us the displaced child Ruth Quanseh, who, like her biblical ancestor, seems more at home in a foreign land than in the land of her birth, while the characters of Sunday, Constance, and Love show conspicuous Christian influence in "A Fetish for Love." In "The Pure Diamond Man," we see Tetteh hide his baptismal certificate in order to trick a rich European by appearing to be a person with primitive "weird magnificence" (187), thus showing that his desire for material things is more important to him than his display of true faiths. "The Voices of Adamo" gives us the innocent Adamo, who, "[un]aware that he was an African" (212), kills his commanding officer and happily accepts imprisonment, rather than being released from his regiment back into the lonely jungle. One can hardly help seeing the parallels here of a subverted Garden of Eden. Finally, "A Gourdful of Glory" presents the memorable Mammii Ama (one of the few heroines in this collection), a market trader of calabashes and earthen pots, who, when "the word was revealed to her," finds "she had her power once more" (242). Interestingly, this is not a Christian power, but one of a woman who gains a personal independence by rejecting a white customer, as her country gains its political independence by rejecting the English; and her source of power, as shown in the last paragraph of the collection, is in music and in the image of a tree:

> And they caught the rhythm, and the faith, and the new words. Mammii Ama straightened her plump shoulders. Like a royal palm she stood, rooted in magnificence, spreading her arms like fronds, to shelter the generations. (244)

We know from Laurence's *Memoir* her keen awareness that "women have been intentionally excluded from many of the rituals and practices and words of Christianity, and . . . other monotheisms" (15). Surely much of her insight into the nature of Christianity in western society was gained during her years in Africa. As the young wife of an engineer, she would have recognized some parallels between the colonization of the black natives in Africa and the colonization of women in general in the western world. That Laurence writes most of the African stories either in the first person as a male or as a masculine-toned omniscient narrator reveals the extent to which she herself was colonized.

While Laurence was living in Africa she was very much an "other," or

outsider to the native people. In fact, the Laurences were felt to be such a marginalized species that the Ghanaians hardly suspected they even had sex (*Prophet* 101). While some readers today question the appropriateness of a white Christian woman rewriting stories narrated by native Africans, Laurence differs greatly from those who present natives as little more than what Rudyard Kipling called "the white man's burden." Her *Tree for Poverty* (1954) was praised by African scholars who had never before seen their own cultural works in print. One Somali man she spoke with expressed his appreciation this way: "My people had this vast body of oral poetry, but until the book came out we never really knew that we had a literature" (Kroetsch "Interview" 55).

Her interest in recording previously unwritten materials, the oral traditions of a foreign people, demonstrates her awareness, conscious or not, of the importance of the spoken word in revealing cultural truths generally out of reach to anyone not immersed in the culture, and certainly out of reach to the academic community. While physically far removed from her own homeland, she captures in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* the strength of orality she grew up with on the Manitoba prairie. These stories form the basis of what will become a new mythology in *The Diviners*.

Laurence "studied Nigerian religious attitudes and general world view" (Morley *Long Journey*, 71-72) extensively in order to produce a critical book on Nigerian dramatists and novelists, titled *Long Drums and Cannons* (1968). Her instinct to put stories on paper seems to be an attempt to understand the stories and the people (and herself) more than to control them, though certainly the "capturing" of words–the snatching them from the air, the oral, the dynamic, and placing them on paper, like a butterfly collector–must empower the author.

Laurence's presentations of Africa in her fictional works often parallel those of the finest native African artists, such as Chinua Achebe, to whom she is compared by such scholars as G.D. Killam and W.H. New. One of the major motifs for both Achebe and Laurence is the issue of colonization, especially as it involves the introduction of Christianity into the polytheistic native beliefs, which usually facilitates the disintegration of the society, as Achebe's highly acclaimed novel reveals in its title: *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

The connection between the appearance of Christian missionaries and the colonization of Africa by the British is clear. The patriarchal and hierarchical system of the church, with its one king-like god, is a replication of the political system that the British proceeded to impose on Africa. Just as the native people worshipped many different gods, they also had different leaders in each tribal community, which impaired the British colonization efforts. The church model was an advantageous one for political appropriation, as well as religious appropriation, making the religious alliances of the natives of no small concern to the district commissioners.

While political concerns and impacts are recorded in Laurence's African stories, the focus is on the characters' immediate surroundings and personal struggles with their gods and beliefs, not political theories. "The Drummer of All the World," the first story in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* collection, is told in the

first person by Matthew, a white male who has returned to Ghana, his childhood home. First published in 1956 in *Queen's Quarterly*, this story predates *This Side Jordan* and may be one of the stories Laurence refers to in her memoir when she speaks about her initial strategy of writing in the male voice. The spiritual conflict of the narrator, the son of a missionary, is introduced immediately: "My father thought he was bringing Salvation to Africa. I, on the other hand, no longer know what salvation is" (1). Matthew, conspicuously named after the first book of the New Testament, struggles with the reality of what Christianity actually brought to Ghana and tries to reconcile his role there as a colonizer (as part of a missionary family) with his deep beliefs in the African spiritual rites. His childhood play-time was spent with his native friend, Kwabena, with whom he became immersed in the spiritual traditions of the local people when out of sight of his father. In this way he is like the reverse negative of *This Side Jordan*'s Nathaniel. Born to a white Christian family, Matthew's "imprint" religion is Christianity, but the one that embraces him is pagan. Kwabena's mother was his "wet nurse," indicating the depth to which he was suckled on that which was sacred to the natives. He recounts how "Kwabena and I stole eggs to give to the fetish" (3), and how he was "ashamed" of his father's determination, and often success, in seeking out and destroying fetish huts.[1] As a child Matthew obviously aligns himself more closely with the native rites than with those of his father: " 'I have discovered another fetish hut,' my father announced importantly one day. I nearly *betrayed* myself and the whole village by asking which one" (4-5, emphasis mine).

Matthew experiences a true double exposure to cultural beliefs. While his father is preaching the Christian faith, Kwabena's mother is telling him the Ghanaian version of the creation story, which is startlingly analogous to the biblical one: "In the beginning, when Odamankoma created all things–" (3). Ironically, it seems that Matthew is "converted" to the tribal faiths more thoroughly than the natives are converted to the Christian one. He says, "when my mother was ill for the last time, I invoked Nyankopon's strong name, Obommubuwafre, not for love of her but as a duty" (10), showing his instinct is to call not on Christ, but on the native gods. However, he recognizes in retrospect the impossibility of his truly embracing the African faith, just as he

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[1] In our culture, the word *fetish* has taken on the Freudian interpretation which posits it as an object of misplaced desire, particularly as it pertains to sexuality. For example, one who has "abandoned the genital as an object altogether and [has] taken some other part of the body as the object they desire--a woman's breast, a foot or a plait of hair" (Freud, *Lectures* 346-47) is said to have a fetish. Freud, however, borrowed the fetish concept from his studies of "primitive tribes," much of which is described in his *Totem and Taboo*, not unlike those presented in *This Side Jordan* and *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. Without getting into the presumptive superiority inherent in labeling western society as being further "progressed," it is interesting to look at the role of the pagan fetish as a reverenced object, something invested with value and significance. One would be hard pressed to define the difference in religious principle between the bones or rocks of the fetish huts and the crosses and candlesticks of the Christian church.

realizes the ridiculousness of their embracing his. In the end, while it is the Christian god he speaks to, it is not exactly the "God of [his] fathers" (10) in the literal sense, who would be unlikely to have the sense of humor or tolerance that Matthew ascribes to him:

> God of my fathers, I cannot think You minded too much. If anything, I think You might have smiled a little at my seriousness, smiled as Kwaku did, with mild mockery, at the boy who thought Africa was his. (10)

It is a hallmark of Laurence's characters, however, that they maintain, or resume in adulthood, the basic religious beliefs of their parents, though often with adjustments. Laurence feels this to be the case with herself: "I am a Christian . . . although perhaps not an orthodox one" (*Dance* 13). Both the Canadian and the African fiction seem to uphold the idea that we are ultimately a product of our past, our history. Interestingly, there is less difference shown between the polytheistic gods and the Christian one in the African works than there is between the several Christian sects in the Manawaka novels.

In an interview with Rosemary Sullivan, Laurence says that in Somaliland she learned that "a small l liberal such as myself . . . can, without meaning to, be incredibly condescending" (63) and that "just having the heart in the right place is *not* enough" (64). These are realizations Matthew comes to as well. Though Matthew never really sees himself as a colonizer (any more than Laurence sees herself as one), he comes to realize the inescapability of his color and class. When he tries to recapture with Kwabena their childhood game of going "to look at the fetish hut," Kwabena becomes "guarded" and bitterly rebukes him: "I do not go there any more" (11), he says, showing that finally the missionary smashing of the huts resulted in a very real oppression. Kwabena now sees his countrymen as "slaves of the English" (11) and Matthew as a slave owner. When Matthew tries to ease the tension saying that "Independence is the new fetish" (17), Kwabena censures him: "You would like us to remain forever living in thatch huts, pounding our drums and telling pretty stories . . . " (17). He concludes that perhaps the attitude of Matthew's missionary father was preferable: "at least he did not want us to stand still" (17).

In her essay "The Very Best Intentions" (1964), Laurence discusses her own "militant liberalism" (25), which is brought into question by a young Ghanaian lawyer. She places herself in a position similar to Matthew's, admiring "the ancient Africa, the Africa of the talking drums," but she eventually recognizes that "I could afford to be fascinated. None of it threatened me" (27). Indeed, Kwabena reminds Matthew that "the drums told of our fear–always there was fear, fear, fear–making us pay out more and more to the fetish priest–" (17), so that in the end he realizes, "It was only I who could afford to love the old Africa" (18). Here the differences between the two religions are effectively minimized: both controlling their believers through fear, both requiring payment in materialistic terms for redemption and both capable of conversion.

"The Merchant of Heaven" is also narrated by a white male, the architect Will Kettridge. This story portrays another missionary, Brother

Lemon, come to save the "savages" by converting them to Christianity: "coming–as traders once went to Babylon–for the souls of men" (50). The brother brings with him, among other things, "a lovely little pigskin case which enfolded a water purifier" (51); the narrator soon realizes that Mr. Lemon himself is "a kind of soul-purifier, sucking in the septic souls and spewing them back one hundred per cent pure" (53). The portrayal of Lemon, an appropriately pale and sour name, is at once hilarious and pathetic. Even though Kettridge says that he "was never tempted to laugh" because "Lemon's faith was of a quality that defied ridicule" (57), the reader is perhaps less generous. Lemon is a man well equipped with finances and enthusiasm, yet poorly outfitted with common sense and the ability to see beyond the simple black and white (so to speak) of the fundamental religious differences. He is portrayed as a failing Christ: when he finds himself among the beggars, he is only able to give them money, which he sees as a way "to ease their lives" (56), instead of spiritual guidance or faith. Patricia Morley notes that Brother Lemon's "mental and emotional deprivations match the Africans' physical ones" (*Journey* 70). Indeed, he is shown as being the real cripple in the end, incapable of ministering and unwilling to build the church after "six years of prayer and preparation" (52). His declaration that "without [his] religion, [he'd] be nothing" (64) rings all too true to the reader.

Lemon feels empowered by his external god and believes that all his actions are in the service of a greater good. He falsely assumes that he carries the omnipotent power to prop up others by building the structures–physical (the church) and philosophical (the preaching)–that he leans on himself in this new land. But he never really gets beyond handing out physical relief. He is not so much a conduit for God's power as a cardboard front. While Kettridge, as architect of the pending church, provides something of a foil for Lemon by displaying some true sensibilities of "building" relationships with the natives, it is Danso, the local artist, who draws the final lines of difference which convince Brother Lemon of the impossibility of his task, and who finally leaves us to wonder who is appropriating whom in the end. Danso points out to Kettridge the lack of difference between Lemon's Christianity and the tribal rituals already in place: "If you repeat something often enough, someone will believe you. The same people go to the fetish priest, this man's [Lemon's] brother" (66). This gives a whole new perspective on Brother Lemon's position. Kettridge suggests to the missionary, who is upset when he realizes some of his converts still attend fetish rituals, that maybe there is not much difference between the religious practices offered:

> "How do you think they interpret your golden candle-sticks and gates of pearl?" I went on. "The ones who go because they've tried everywhere else? As ju-ju, Mr. Lemon, just a new kind of ju-ju. That's all." (69)

The brother is seriously affected. This is the first hint that Lemon might see the futility in his attempts to colonize the spirit of the Africans. It is as though it has never occurred to him before that they might not see Christ as an entirely new concept, but just a re-figuring of an old one. He has assumed he is working with a blank slate. Danso tells Lemon they already had "real proper gods. If we'd been left alone, our gods would have grown, as yours did, into

One" (63), thus negating the essential difference between them. While there seems to be a presumption there that having one god, as Christians do, is something of a natural progression, a more civilized or higher order of things, as Freud also suggests in *Totem and Taboo*, I would argue that this is perhaps an indication that Danso is showing signs of being influenced by the one-god-theory that accompanies colonization. Kettridge continues to challenge Lemon's beliefs by saying that "maybe Diana was better for [the Greeks] than Jehovah. She was theirs, anyway" (69), implying that the gods who grow out of a culture are perhaps more useful than those brought in from outside sources.

The pluralistic manifestation of Christianity–marking its similarity to paganism–is clear to Danso but invisible to Lemon, who is shocked when Danso tells him with "dignity," that he is "several times a Christian":

> I have been baptized into the Methodist, Baptist and Roman Catholic churches, and one or two others whose names I forget. . . . So many, and each says his is the only one. The Akan church was simpler. (62)

Lemon fails to see the irony here or to acknowledge that the Africans "had a very fine religion here before ever a whiteman came" (63), dismissing any previous influence on the soul: "Idolatry, paganism. . . . I don't call that a religion" (63).

Those holding secular beliefs posit that the early European gods were more or less created by the people to help explain the unpredictability of the universe, and later appropriated by the church fathers to exert control over the masses. Once the structures of the Roman Catholic church were in place, God could not be called on except through a "father." This is paternity at its most poignant. Brother Lemon, a product of 2000 years of this tradition, believes himself to be a father in this way–that he can be a conduit to Christ for all those who are still going through the wrong channels. He is, however, most un-Christ-like in his obvious attachment to the material: his "new two-toned orchid Buick" (59) and his belief in "the new Jerusalem, where the walls are of jasper and topaz and amethyst, and the city is of pure gold" (60) reveal worship of wealth and comfort.

It is not Kettridge's arguments, however, but Danso's painting that is the final straw for Brother Lemon. Danso points out that one of the problems he has with Christians is their denial of the importance of the physical body, the idea "that life on earth doesn't matter" (67): "It must be quite a procedure to tear a soul out of a living body and throw the inconvenient flesh away like fruit rind" (75). Ultimately, it is he who shows the extreme importance of body portrayal, the rind of flesh, to the Brother, offering him a painting of Christ for the new church, depicted as a strong, well-built, generous, black man. Upon seeing it, Lemon's "tall frame sagged as though he had been struck . . . . this was a threat he had never anticipated" (76). The fact that Lemon sees this portrayal as a threat shows his own fear of becoming colonized and thereby disempowered. It had not occurred to him that the Africans might actually appropriate Christ and make him one of their own, a concept so horrifying to the missionary that he abruptly returns to Philadelphia without completing his church. For Lemon, things must remain black and white, whereas Danso, a

more potent visionary, believes "we will invent new colours" (76). He would use art not only as a means of bridging the gap between the old and the new, but actually to create a hitherto unforeseen possibility–*new* colours, integrations of a kind not yet perceived.

In "Godman's Master" the state of the African dwarf, who is kept in a box at the will of his "owner" until "rescued" by Moses, clearly parallels that of the suburban housewife. While Moses, representative of the typical masculine order, thinks, "there is more to freedom . . . than not living in a box," Godman, the dwarf-oracle, corrects him: "You would not think so if you had ever lived in a box" (155). In an interview with Rosemary Sullivan, Laurence comments on her consciousness of the "whole question of freedom, both political and personal" (65) as it relates to and parallels Godman in Africa and women in western society:

> People who have never been subjected to a very oppressive regime, or people who as an individual have never been trapped, and in some way or other oppressed, as many women have been of course, simply don't understand that their concepts of freedom are quite different from the person who has actually been oppressed. (65)

One can hardly miss the biblical overtones in naming in this story (or in most of the others for that matter). But to name a shrunken human Godman and his master Moses has definite implications. Although Moses is not the narrator of this story, it is told from his viewpoint, which is clearly a position of power far beyond Godman's, not unlike the Old Testament stories attributed to Moses but not written in the first person. In the biblical sense, this shows Moses as being more powerful than God (i.e. Godman), a concept worth consideration. The Old Testament, after all, has Moses deliver the ten commandments, and Moses listen to "the people," for they are too afraid of God: "And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Ex.20:19). It is, ultimately, the person who is telling the story who has the power, the one who speaks. When Stacey, in *The Fire-Dwellers*, says to God, "but then you're not dependent upon me, or let's hope not" (*Fire* 63), we realize the idea has crossed Laurence's mind that, indeed, God *is* dependent on humans–perhaps utterly so , in fact. Without humans to tell the story and write it down, to give it form, there might be no god.

"The Tomorrow-Tamer," the title story–or rather, as Clara Thomas distinguishes it, the *tale*–after which the collection is named, provides some of the new colors, new combinations of faith suggested in "The Merchant of Heaven." While this story does not seem to be overtly about religion and spirituality, it perhaps reveals more about the internalized beliefs of both the natives and the whites than the other stories. The tale is told by an omniscient narrator whose beliefs, as in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, are those of a familiar insider who seems positioned as a male. Describing Okomofo Ofori, the narrator tells us, "He was the priest of the river, and there was nothing he did not know" (87), thus locating himself within the native belief system. The story depicts the transformation of the boy Kofi from being "no one in particular, no one you would notice" (81), into a priest, and, finally, "a man consumed by

the gods" who will "live forever" (104)–not unlike Jesus Christ. We are, however, ultimately left to wonder whether it is Owura, the god of the river, who has "consumed" him or whether he, and the village in general, consumed a new western system of beliefs brought by the Europeans who came to build the bridge, the process of which is the focus of the story.

Perhaps more directly than the other stories in the collection, this one reveals the immediate impact of colonization, and shows up some of the cultural differences built on different belief systems. The bridge builders' lack of respect for the villagers is clear: "The tractor drivers laughed curses at the gaping villagers and pretended to run them down until they shrieked and fled in humiliation like girls or mice" (92), but it is their lack of understanding for the native religious beliefs that is even more disturbing. When the "bulldozers assaulted the slender trees" of the holy grove, "Kofi felt as though his own bones were being broken, his own body assaulted, his heart invaded by the massive blade" (93). This affinity with the land is completely foreign to the bridge builders. In fact, they do not believe it possible that the villagers are sincere. When the river priest, "running like a child . . . his face . . . wet with his tears" (93), expresses his objections, the Superintendent sighs: "Ask him how much he wants . . . . Will ten pounds do it?" (93), revealing his own western sense of godliness in the concept of money. Soon, however, the souls of the villagers will be occupied by the Christian gods, just as the land becomes occupied by western mechanization, imposing linear paths both physically and spiritually. The gods that are holy to the river dwellers are taking their blows first, soon to be mowed down, perhaps bulldozed completely, by Christianity.

Kofi makes friends with Emmanuel, the leader of the ironworkers, who is hardly the savior his name implies.[2] Patricia Morley points out that "Emmanuel typifies the rootless freedom of a secular, technological culture. The bridge builder's life is 'to make money, and spend it'" (*Journey* 71). Indeed, the conversion process in this story seems to be focused more on consumerism than on Christianity: "The village had never seen so much cash money before" (90). Ironically, Kofi, first sent to "test the footing" (89) of the bridge builders' intentions, plunges to his death after losing his footing "on the silver paint" (103).

Unlike the ironworkers who are aware of the dangers of walking on the high beams but survive by refusing to acknowledge the possibility of falling, Kofi has already felt in his bones the sense of obliteration, of sacred space fallen to mechanization. And, as Emmanuel tells him at the Hail Mary bar, "If you think you might fall then you do" (95). The fall as a biblical metaphor is clearly at work here, in this Eden, but, instead of a fall from grace, Kofi's fall ultimately immortalizes him as a god through the story. Perhaps the most that can be hoped for in any culture is the survival of the story, which reminds us of how deeply we, and others, are constructed by our social and cultural

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[2] The literal translation of Emmanuel is " God is with us"; the coming of Christ is prophesied in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah with the words: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14); also of interest is Isaiah 8:8: "And the stretching out of his hands shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel."

histories. Laurence's desire for new visions seems consistent with Chinua Achebe's. He concedes that he wants to raise awareness that "things look different to different observers, and that one's very perceptions are shaped by the social and cultural context out of which one operates" (24). Just as Achebe was shocked into awareness when he realized, reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that "I was one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach" ("Author" 24), Laurence must also realize, perhaps with equal horror, that she is seen by the natives as one of the imperial white Christians come to save souls.

Kofi becomes more unsettled as he realizes that his fall–and perhaps that of his people–is imminent and, in a desperate bid to combine the old with the new, endows the bridge with a spirit and makes himself its priest. "Something is dwelling in it . . . . Something strong as Owura himself,"[3] he tells "the wise and wizened faces of his father, his uncles, his chief and his priest" (99). In this we see another instance of the native belief system incorporating the European concepts into their own spiritual structure. That the bridge, a conspicuous symbol of a possible elevated link between two cultures that are "as separate as the river fish from the forest birds" (90), is given a spirit seems indicative of the creative possibilities of incorporation within the village. This is perhaps even more remarkable in a culture that does not "have any real concept of what a straight line is" (*Prophet* 153) before the white bridge builders arrive.

In the end, it is Kofi's death, seen as the bridge's sacrifice to the river god, that appeases the village elders' discomfort: "The bridge, clearly, had sacrificed its priest in order to appease the river. The people felt they knew the bridge now" (103). Ironically, this ultimately affects the bridge builders' perceptions of reality, again reversing the appropriation process: "But looking up now, and hearing the metallic humming of the cables, it seemed to [the Superintendent] that the damn thing almost was alive." But, rather than acknowledge this possibility or accept anything inanimate as animate, he chalks his suspicions up to neurosis: " He was beginning to have delusions; it was time he went on leave" (103). This leaves us questioning who really is the "tomorrow-tamer" here. While Emmanuel and the Superintendent, representative of the colonial order, see themselves as taming the wild, making inroads, so to speak, it is actually Kofi who creates the real bridge between the cultures, by providing a story through which integration is understood, and without which the future of the villagers' spirits would seem impossibly bleak.

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[3] The attribution of life to those things the typical westerner calls inanimate is not exclusive to African tribalism. Alice Walker's Celie, in *The Color Purple*, speaks of a spiritual connection where one is "part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (qtd. in Plaskow & Christ's *Weaving*, 103). This is a common precept of North American first peoples as well, many of whose native language structures have no masculine or feminine pronouns, but often classify nouns and verbs according to animacy. In Plains Cree for example, rocks (*asiniy*) and trees (*mitos*) are classified as animate, whereas a shoe (*maskisin*) is not (Hunter 1993). Rudy Wiebe describes the affinity the northern native people feel with the animals in *A Discovery of Strangers*, their knowledge that "the hides remain[ed] gifts from the animals" (132), just as the food did.

It is the *story* that lives on and becomes a legend, and the story that spooks the bridge men but pleases the villagers. Obviously, the idea that "something is dwelling in it" threatens the European sense of power and control over the native people. One can hardly help feeling, in the final analysis, that the bridge builders have lost their bridge to the gods instead of the gods being lost to it. In any case, there is the possibility for integration of the belief systems here. The Europeans are affected, albeit against their better judgment or conscious control, by the native beliefs just as the Africans are influenced by the powers of Christianity and consumerism, although neither is totally consumed by the other. The lines are not so clearly drawn as they are in *This Side Jordan*, where there is little potential for mixing colours or religions. The stability and strength of the pagan faith, the faith which in this case grows out of natural surroundings, ancestral stories and traditions as well as personal experience, in these stories provides a foundation for the later characters of Laurence's Manawaka fiction. The Africans are not taken over by the Christian influence; rather, they find creative ways of integrating it into their existing mythology. This seemingly paradoxical process of integration and creation is replicated in *The Diviners* to conceive new gods more suitable to the changing lives of women.

If God wants us to do a thing, he should make his wishes sufficiently clear. Sensible people will wait till he has done this before paying much attention to him.

Samuel Butler (*Notebooks* 116)

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

Job 16:18

Chapter 3
The Stone Angel

In *The Stone Angel*, Laurence makes a great leap from writing as an outsider–a stranger in a strange land–to writing as an insider, composing a first person narrative from within a woman whose history is rooted in the same physical and cultural landscape as Laurence's own self. Hagar, an unlikely heroine, is not struggling towards a new world in the same ways as Nathaniel or Kofi, although she is preparing to enter a new realm as she approaches death, and is distinctly aware of the shortcomings of the Christian god with whom her society tells her she must make peace. Hagar is given no optional gods to choose from, but feels her integrity is threatened if she participates in the rituals of the church of her father. Her descent to Shadow Point, where she finds a sense of inner peace and power–what some would call grace–is marked by an unusual combination of religious imagery, blending concepts of the highly ritualistic Christian Eucharist with "pagan" elements of earth and animal worship. Revelations are brought to her in the chaotic wilderness, in a ramshackle, seaside sanctuary more resembling a fetish hut than the tidy, organized, place of worship she has been told holds the key to salvation. That her transformation eventually allows what is for her an unprecedented communion with women shows that Laurence is already, consciously or unconsciously, tilling the ground for a reconstruction of women's place in the granting of spiritual power and freedom. In this chapter I will explore how Hagar's traditional relationships with males–her father, brother/s, husband and sons, act, often through Christian influence, to disempower her, while her unconventional association with Murray Lees and her eventual alliance with women and nature bring her peace and strength.

Margaret Atwood points out in *Survival* that, while Canadian literature may suffer from a curious lack of sex-maiden Venuses, it displays "a bumper

crop of sinister Hecate-Crones" (199). Laurence's Hagar, the ninety- year-old heroine of *The Stone Angel*, is a classic example, a somewhat raucous blending of "the dread Goddess of the night" (Edith Hamilton's description of Hecate, 32) and the biblical slave girl who bears Abraham's son and receives guidance from angels (Genesis 13-16).[1] The first of Laurence's Manawaka series, *The Stone Angel* was profoundly important to the author, who says it was "the book on which I had to stake the rest of my life" (*Dance* 158). And it did alter the course of her life: "It was the novel into which I had invested my life, my heart, and my spirit. It was the novel that had finally made me feel it was necessary to leave my marriage" (*Dance* 165). While Laurence does not go into any details about the breakup of her marriage, we might postulate that there is no comfortable place for a woman with an independent voice in the conventional confines of marriage; at least, she does not show us any in her novels. Ironically, given the title of the novel, this seems like a classic case of what Virginia Woolf calls "Killing the Angel in the House [as] part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Eagleton 52). Almost all of Hagar's relationships with men–her father, her husband, her sons–go wrong when she asserts her own will and speaks her mind. While Hagar's motives often seem selfish, much of the time she is only trying to assert personal control over a role she is being asked to play for someone else's benefit. We learn through her flashbacks that she was indeed a kind of biblical slave girl, deeply controlled by her "religious roots," which Evelyn Hinz says dramatize "the extent to which religious ideology permeates even secular aspects of human existence" (82). It is ironic that, as Hagar advances from being a maiden to a lover and mother, then to a crone, there ceases to be much direct biblical allusion: the bible does not give us many cranky old women–only cranky old men. The archetype must move into the pagan territory of Hecate. This is reflective of how women in general, and Hagar in particular, must move beyond the bible to the deeper history of polytheistic beliefs in order to discover role models for spiritually independent women.

An early example of Hagar refusing a religious model occurs when she rejects the Madonna role of donning her dead mother's shawl in order to comfort her dying brother Dan: "To play at being her–it was beyond me" (25). Even though she suffers for this decision, scorned by her brother Matt, who eventually wears the shawl himself, she still finds her voice:

> 'I can't, Matt.' I was crying, shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough. (25)

And with this voice comes Matt's rejection, as he takes on the mother's role that Hagar refuses. However, as Keith Louise Fulton points out, "his risks are much

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[1] In the Bible, the Egyptian Hagar is maidservant to Abraham's seemingly barren wife, Sarah. Sarah invites Abraham to impregnate Hagar but when Hagar, having conceived, begins to "despise" her mistress, Sarah abuses her and Hagar flees to the "wilderness"; here, an "angel of the Lord" appears before her and prophesies the birth of her son, Ishmael. The angel encourages Hagar's to return to Sarah and Abraham, which she does, soon fulfilling the prophecy. Alice Laffey points out that "Hagar is the first woman in the Old Testament who receives an apparition" (38).

less than hers. . . . Remember–her mother *died* for being her mother" (107-8). We never really find out if Matt forgives her for, or understands, her refusal. The night before her unsanctioned wedding, Matt is going to send "that plaid shawl" as a gift, but at the last minute "decided he didn't want to send it after all" (50). Hagar never figures out if he meant to forward it as a sign of forgiveness or of contempt. Hagar's rejection of the Madonna/mother role for Dan is perhaps her first defiance of religious tradition, of male expectation, and of her societal female role; its repercussions set the stage for the kind of castigation she would always receive when she acts on her own will instead of on others' wishes. As Laurence says in an interview with Rosemary Sullivan, "I think everyone has to pay an enormous price in some way or other, for any kind of independence" (72).

Hagar's relationship with her father, Jason Currie, whose initials conspicuously reflect those of the Christian father, Jesus Christ, also ends in alienation when she defies him regarding her choice of husbands. There is an ambiguity about the father-daughter relationship that makes this defiance particularly problematic. Hagar's father seems obsessed with controlling her body and overly concerned with whoever else might lay hands on her. As an adult, Hagar still "feared his hands, and him," but would "as lief have died as let him know" (44). At the same time, Jason Currie's concerns are with others' hands. His response when Hagar says she is going to a dance implies that he thinks she has no control over protecting her body, but rather that it is his to "let" out: "You think I'd let you go to the kind of dances they have there, and let all the farm boys paw you?" (44). And when Hagar says she will marry Bram, her father gasps and turns on her: "Has he touched you? . . . . Has he?" (48). His concern seems more one of having his property violated than his daughter harmed.

When, at twenty-four, she decides to marry Bram Shipley, a man "as common as dirt" (48), it seems that she is doing it largely to challenge her father's control and assert her ability to make her own decisions:

> "There's not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family's consent," he said. "It's not done."
>
> "It'll be done by me," I said, drunk with exhilaration at my daring. (49)

The punishment for refusing to be controlled by the secular father is not unlike that of refusing the religious one (as Eve would attest): hostility and abandonment. Years later, Hagar tells the minister, "Two hundred thousand he was worth, at least, and never a red cent of it came to me" (41). Poverty is the reward for her defiance. This may seem incongruent with Laurence's claim that the novel is about "survival" (New 21). However, when we realize it is not a material or even physical survival Hagar seeks, but rather, as Laurence says, an "attempt of the personality to survive with some dignity" (New 21), it becomes clear that she is at least attempting to assert her independence by walking away from what her son John calls "that kind of debt . . . you're never free from, if the person doesn't want you to be" (236). Unfortunately, John is not successful in his escape from Hagar, who for most of her life replicates her

father's type of control instead of seeking to transform it; John is killed in his act of defiance.

Bram never shows the desire to rule over Hagar the way her father does. One senses he is fond of Hagar, as he was of his horses, and is not interested in either the money she might have brought him or the sense of power he might obtain from his role as a husband. Bram's horses play an important role in this novel, not only because his relationship with them reveals the gentle side of his nature in a way that sharply contrasts him with Hagar's father, but also because his loss of them invokes one of the only honest and loving conversations he and Hagar ever have. One of the reasons Bram never gets ahead financially is because "he never got a good price when he sold horses, saying he'd rather see the few he sold going to men he knew would look after them well" (85). When Soldier, his favourite stallion, wanders off and dies in a snow storm, Bram freezes his face and hands looking for him. Unable to hide his emotions over the loss, he says to Hagar, "I guess you think I'm daft, eh?" to which she responds: "I'm sorry about it Bram. I know you were fond of him." She remembers, "Bram looked up at me with such a look of surprise that it still pains me in recalling" (87). His shock at her kindness shows what a rare commodity it was, and her pain in recalling it shows her regret for not revealing it more often. Hagar's rare empathy for him is rewarded by his declining to have sex with her that night, mistakenly "thinking it was the greatest favor he could do me" (88). But she cannot reveal her true desire for him. Evelyn Hinz points out how Hagar's sexual reservations are ultimately tied to her Christian background:

> [I]f Hagar's sexual prudery and inability to articulate her delight in carnal love are symptomatic of the Victorian ethos of her time, Laurence also traces the problem to the spiritual orientation of Christianity. Thus it is in the context of her recollection of the line "His banner over me was love" that Hagar in retrospect acknowledges the way in which she–like the commentators who allegorized the erotic *Song of Solomon*–refused to let her husband sense her sexual response. (83)

Ironically, Hagar tries to play god to her son, just as her father did to her, in trying to keep her son John from marrying Arlene, the daughter of another "common as dirt" Manawaka native. Perhaps it is here that Hagar's voice is most disturbing, for it takes on the patriarchal ring which seeks to command the behaviour of others. Like her father, Hagar finds false excuses for her desire to control John, saying to Arlene's mother that "the money's the main concern" (211), while she schemes to separate the two. Tragically, as John and Arlene are condensing the last of their time together, they are killed in a collision with a train, and Hagar takes on the qualities of the stone angel that marks her mother's grave: "I found my tears had been locked too long and wouldn't come now at my bidding. The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (243). Strangely, John is the final catalyst in erecting the stone angel figuratively, just as he does earlier physically under Hagar's guidance. Hagar's will and voice here not only alienate her most

valued relationship, but cause the death of her son, and to some degree, of herself and her desire to speak. Perhaps it is from this point on that Hagar begins to question the authenticity of her voice, its power, and its capacity for destruction when used wrongly.

Throughout *The Stone Angel* we see an interweaving of the themes of religion, pride and wealth, as Hagar describes the ancestral legacy inherent in her mother's tombstone: "My mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty" (3). The implication here is that her mother's angel–both the physical grave marker and the ethereal soul–can be bought with earthly money and used as a prop, a trophy for those with power in society, just as the woman , the wife, herself is somehow bought as well, to be displayed as an indicator of her husband's status. Hagar's consciousness of the hypocrisy of this is easily discernible.

However, while Hagar's "meek" and "feeble" mother seems to have accepted her role as chattel and goes "gentle into that good night" of death, Hagar is stubborn and defiant and will, to continue the Dylan Thomas epigraph, "rage, rage against the dying of the light," indicating that her mother's ethereal angel did not successfully inhabit Hagar's body upon leaving the mother's spent one. It seems entirely possible that, as Frank Pesando suggests, "the suddenness and prevalence of death, made so evident by her experiences in Somaliland, continued to preoccupy Margaret Laurence" (55) in the writing of this novel.

The constant association between wealth and Christianity is implicit not only in the purchase of the largest and "costliest" angel in the cemetery, but also in Jason Currie's contribution to the erection of the new Presbyterian church, complete with "purchased family pews . . . furnished with . . . long cushions of brown and beige velour, so our few favored bottoms would not be bothered by hard oak and a lengthy sermon" (15-16). One could say, then, that Jason Currie (among others), literally bought the church.[2] While this kind of sponsorship seems to have enhanced Mr. Currie's sense of power, the novel implies that it did little for his soul. As he constantly reminds Hagar, "he pulled himself up by his bootstraps" (7) and was "a self-made man"(17), clearly attributing none of his success to the help of God.

While eight-year-old Hagar shares in her father's pride of possessions, hoping the congregation would clap when his name was announced, "for I had new white lace gloves and could have shown them off so well, clapping" (16), it is not through materialism that she becomes proud as an adult, but rather through rejecting it.

Throughout *The Stone Angel* Hagar refuses to be bribed by patriarchal figures. She has no more respect for a god who can be bought or influenced through prayer than she would for herself if she allowed her self to be coerced through money (her father) or begging (to become the mother/Mary figure holding her dying brother). She cannot be bothered trying to figure out "secret codes" to access the Lord, even to save her own life, as she tells Mr. Troy, the

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[2] I can not help thinking how little things have changed since Chaucer's Wife of Bath spoke of purchasing an "indulgence" (line 84) in the fourteenth century, which acted as protection against sins and assured space in heaven for those with enough money to pay for it.

patient minister who suggests that her disappointment in God stems from praying for the wrong things: "Well, who's to know? If God's a crossword puzzle, or a secret code, it's hardly worth the bother, it seems to me" (119). Hagar expects God to reveal himself to her in a clear and direct manner; she is tired of hidden meanings. Even as she nears death and contemplates the concept of prayer, she defies the rules set out by Christianity: "Ought I to appeal? It's the done thing. *Our Father*–no. I want no part of that. All I can think is–*Bless me or not, Lord, just as You please, for I'll not beg*" (307). That the Lord's Prayer, which she begins, starts with "Our Father" undoubtedly influences her decision. To ask for his help is to give him power, of which she rightly discerns he already has too much. As well, Hagar recognizes the ridiculousness of bargaining for her soul, and refuses to participate in bartering with God. It is as though she feels this might be cheating somehow. If saying the words is all that is required, as with Johnny's Kestoe's mother Mary in *This Side Jordan*, then she will not participate. However, while Hagar may not like God, or trust him, she does believe he exists: "What if it matters to Him after all, what happens to us?" (90). It is only the method of communication provided by the church with which she seems at odds.

At the age of ninety, Hagar no longer has the luxury of ignoring her body, which is usually paralleled in some way to plants and animals rather than other humans, perhaps indicating that she identifies more strongly with the "lower species" than with "man." Hagar pictures herself like a dandelion in a vase–"we forget their weediness and marvel that they [are] there at all," but is at odds with the image "of such people as Marvin, who is somehow comforted by the picture of old ladies feeding like docile rabbits on the lettuce leaves" (5). She cannot help marveling at her own heartiness–that she is there at all–while mourning the loss of her physical autonomy, which strips her of her rights and freedoms. Her blunt descriptions of her physical limitations and loss of control over her body place her in the same category as the injured chicks which no-name Lottie crushes as a child or the fighting cock of Matt's that was not ferocious enough, so had to have its neck wrung, or even the seagull that Hagar herself inadvertently kills in her attempts to free it from the cannery. Finally, when she is rescued, she lies "huge and immovable, like an old hawk caught, eyes wide open, unblinking" (251), refusing to see her captors. Yet to admit, even to herself, let alone Doris, that this loss of physical stature and power is final and irretrievable, is almost more than she can bear, perhaps especially because as a young woman Hagar was "a handsome girl" (60), "big-boned and husky as an ox" (59). I take issue with Hans Hauge's view that the episode of Hagar's rescue from the cannery "shows how grace and love come even to the undeserving" (130). The rescue could as easily be seen as a testimony of loss of power and dignity in the aged, especially aged women, who have every right to be angry over their losses, their anger making them no less "deserving."

George Woodcock says "the stone angel, hewn out of the earth is an appropriate symbol for Hagar, the choleric earth mother who is the most bound by her nature of all Margaret Laurence's heroines" ("Human

Elements" 58). Even days before her exodus, when Hagar simply tries to stand up, the reality of her physical state is revealed, notably in terms of earth-bound imagery:

> The arthritis knots inside my legs as though I had pieces of binder twine instead of muscles and veins. My ankles and feet (thick as stumps they are now, and just about as easily moved–one has to uproot them) stumble a very little over the edge of my bedroom rug. . . . . Then I fall. The pain under my ribs is the worst. . . . the ribs buried so deeply under my layered fat seem to fold together like the bamboo bones of a paper fan. I gasp and flounder like a fish on the slimed boards of a dock. . . .
> "Leave me, leave me be–"
> Can this torn voice be mine?
> A series of yelps, like an injured dog.
> Then, terribly, I perceive the tears, my own they must be although they have sprung so unbidden I feel they are like the incontinent wetness of the infirm. (30-31)

She is as immobile as a tree stump, as helpless as a docked fish, sounds like an injured dog, as shameful in her tears as in her incontinence –which she shortly learns is no empty metaphor. Her very human-ness seems to diminish as her body deteriorates. The power of the body to command respect deteriorates as the flesh weakens. Yet all of the comparisons are to natural elements of the earth, implying a certain state of naturalness about the process.

One can hardly help finding Hagar's honesty about her body endearing. It is indeed rare to hear thoughts that ring as true as her simple description upon meeting with the minister, Mr. Troy: "My bowels are locked today. I am Job in reverse. . . . I am bloated, full, weighted down, and I fear I may pass wind" (40). Hagar as Job in reverse goes beyond the physical description, however. What is implied here is that she carries on the inside what Job carried on the outside. While he dealt with the boils and blisters filled with pus in plain view, most of Hagar's pain has been turned inward. Just as she does not speak the truth out loud about the state of her body (as narrator, she tells the reader, but not any of the novel's characters), she also conceals the truth about what she is feeling emotionally–in fact, her body betrays her even there by seemingly refusing to speak words of explanation or kindness to Doris even when she might will it. Perhaps, as with the Chinese brides smuggled in Mr. Oatley's boats, discovery results in death.

Hagar's physical encounters with her father and her brothers go some distance in explaining her tendency to shut down both emotionally and physically in order to maintain a sense of power and control in her later relationships with her husband and sons.

Jason Currie "always used birch for whippings" (8), which fell most often on Hagar's brothers, Matt and Dan. They, in turn, and in biblical fashion, would "come and do to me as they'd been done to. . . . and I'd bawl like the triple-mouthed beasts of hell, as much from shame as hurt"

(8). That Hagar feels shame here is interesting. In these cases she has apparently committed no deed to inspire the whipping, other than to exist and be weaker than her brothers. The shame, then, must be based on the simple truth of being powerless and unable to control her physical response to the "sting . . . on bare flanks still pudgy with baby fat" (8) that causes the howl. Hagar is four or five years old at this point. Perhaps more terrifying than the beatings alone are the threats Hagar receives on her life if she tells: "They'd hiss that if I told they'd take the saw-toothed breadknife that hung in the pantry and open my throat" (8).

However, when Hagar realizes that her brothers have physical limitations as well–for example, Matt wears glasses and Dan still wets the bed–she does tell. Her father rewards her by letting her watch them being beaten, which, of course, adds to her trauma, making her "sorry I'd witnessed it" (8) and furthering her alienation from her siblings. The result of the child Hagar exerting her power for protection in this case is further trauma. This lesson in "telling" seems to stay with Hagar–she tells very little about her pain to anyone again, as evidenced when she exposes the "funniest wee things, scampering" (9) in the raisin barrel to a customer at Currie's General Store. Jason Currie acts swiftly:

> "Hold out your hands, miss."
>
> I wouldn't let him see me cry . . . . He looked at my dry eyes in a kind of fury, as though he'd failed unless he drew water from them. He struck and struck. (9-10)

This emotional control while enduring intense physical suffering is a technique mastered and maintained throughout Hagar's life, though it usually results in further isolation for her.

Jason Currie's embrace of Hagar after this strapping is also significant: "He held me so tightly I almost smothered. . . . I felt caged and panicky and wanted to push him away" (10). This mix of physical punishment with physical affection further confuses her responses to intimacy and results in emotional withdrawal.

Her shame over enjoying sex with Bram is undoubtedly influenced by the religious culture that depicts women as prostitutes or mothers, and historically places them as lascivious temptresses (St. Paul). That she keeps her pleasure carefully guarded from him during all their years together reveals the extent of her oppression and inability to allow anyone to know her true self, which is the downside of pride: "I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead" (81). It is as though she is still a virgin so long as Bram does not know her sexual pleasure: "I made certain that the trembling was all inner" (81).

Hagar hides her pleasure from Bram just as she hid her pain from her father: "Pleasure or pain were one to me, meaningless" (52). Emotions were buried out of fear of being known, being seen as vulnerable, because hiding her true feeling is the only way she can maintain a sense of power. This is why she is so enraged at what old age is doing to her–she can no longer control the exposure of her vulnerabilities–she cries without conscious bidding, wets the bed, and forgets whole events (e.g. that her granddaughter Tina had moved

away months ago). It is only upon consciously allowing her physical "weaknesses" to be seen that she gains any peace of mind. This happens at the end of the novel when she is hospitalized unwillingly and put in a ward with other women who have similarly lost control of their bodies.

Hagar's ability to talk back, as she did in defiance of her father's control, never leaves her, but her choices of when to speak are perhaps more controlled by embedded societal rules of conduct than by her free will. Her loss of ability to speak simple truths parallels her loss of power. With some consciousness that she is losing control over her body, Hagar knows she "must be careful not to speak aloud" (6); this is a frustrating situation for a woman who "can't keep [her] mouth shut [and] never could" (90). When she comes to realize that "pride was my wilderness and the demon that led me there was fear" (292), we recognize the wilderness as loneliness and the fear as fear of exposure–of being seen or heard as her true self, lest this should lead to pain and rejection.

If the inability to speak truth was cultivated in her father's house, it was raised to a fine art in her husband's. Hagar and Bram's relationship is based on expectations and disappointments regarding speech–they had "each married for those qualities we later found we couldn't bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them" (79-80). So, even though Hagar claims to be disgusted by Bram's talk, saying she "could have been proud . . . if only he'd never opened his mouth" (70), it is his words she longs for when she is alone and afraid in the old house by the shore:

> If Bram were here, and intruders came, he'd make short work of them. He'd bawl at them in his bull's voice and they'd go away. He'd curse and swear, and they'd go away all right. But he's not here. (162)

It is not Bram's physical power that will protect, but rather the strength of "his bull's voice" and his ability to "curse and swear"–these things will ward off intruders. She recognizes that it is in speaking loudly and breaking the rules of speech that one does gain power.

Perhaps she so quickly trusts Murray F. Lees because he displays an attitude similar to Bram's regarding such things. He is humored by the politeness they show each other in offering the first tastes of wine and crackers, the proverbial blood and body of Christ:

> "We're so polite," he says.
>
> "I see no reason for people forgetting their manners," I say, somewhat aloofly. . . .
>
> "No?" he says. "Well, I see every reason for it." (223)

Like Bram, who didn't "give a christly curse" (71) how he talked, Murray shows himself to be something of a maverick. But, while Murray may not have a lot of respect for manners and proper speech, he proves to be both articulate and knowledgeable about such things–he knows the power of "the Word" and the power of naming, as we will clearly see when he talks about his grandfather:

> He used to go around preaching the Word. . . . He'd started out as a shingle-binder but changed to a spell-binder–that's what Dad used to say. (225)

Hagar is also conscious of the power of words and naming, but she never is able to articulate her knowledge. She knows that her own name was used by her father in different ways, although probably most importantly as a bid for inheritance money:

> He called me "miss" when he was displeased, and "daughter" when he felt kindly disposed toward me. Never Hagar. I'd been named, hopefully, for a well-to-do spinster great-aunt in Scotland . . . . (14)

Her father's choice of "miss" when displeased shows his desire to sever ties, this being the title of a single female, while "daughter" clearly marks her as his diminutive possession. That he never calls her Hagar, her *Christian* name, except when he forbids her to marry Bram, shows his inability to see her as anything but a relational object, either in or out of his possession, but never as independent *and* related.

By contrast, Bram *always* calls her by her given name, not taking up the tradition of many local men who call their wives "mother" (80). Given Laurence's frank discussion of naming in *Dance on the Earth,* we know that she felt the most important name we have is our given name, the surname simply being a possessive tokenism for fathers and husbands. This is amplified in the character of No-Name Lottie Drieser in *The Stone Angel*. The fact that she has her mother's last name is seen as equivalent to having no name at all. Only those with their father's name are actually considered as properly identified persons.

As a child, Hagar is indignant that her father even deigns to speak with such a woman as No-Name Lottie's mother: "I scorned them both–him, for walking with her and speaking to her; her, because–well, simply because she was No-Name Lottie Drieser's mother" (187). Ironically, the conversation Hagar overhears, which implies the possibility of a past sexual liaison between Lottie's mother and Hagar's father, leaves open the prospect of Jason Currie's actually being the father of Lottie. Long into their adulthood, after Lottie has married "well" and taken an appropriately respectable name, Hagar thinks of her under the original label: ". . . if people had told me forty years ago my son would fall for No-Name Lottie Drieser's daughter, I'd have laughed in their faces" (204). It is this burden of ancestry that makes the idea of John's marriage to Arlene so distasteful to her.

While the aging Hagar struggles to control her body, the depictions of the younger Hagar show an able-bodied daughter, sister, wife, mother, and housekeeper. Not surprisingly, when we consider Hagar's era, she is consistently defined by her relationship to males. Her relations with women are pretty much limited to her childhood companion, no-name Lottie and, eventually, her daughter-in-law, Doris, whom she invariably treats with hostility. There is no bosom buddy, no sisterhood in Hagar's life. Not until all of her external power and control is taken away and she is hospitalized does she have any positive intimate experiences with those of her own sex.

Hagar's last grasp at freeing her body when she sojourns to the sea–a final attempt to run away from home rather than have her home taken

away–is an attempt to maintain a smidgen of control over her life when both law and logic demand that she relinquish it. Hagar seems to have precious little of either the power or the second sight. Never mind the *second* sight, Hagar, like the marble angel, is "doubly blind" for most of her life and is, as Atwood says, "petrified in both senses: turned to stone and terrified" (*Survival* 205); she does not even correctly perceive what is going on in front of her, let alone see beyond it. And her power, her ability to effect change, is wielded like a loose cannon. When she has power, she lacks the ability or the desire to control it. Not until the very end, when her body is all but disintegrated, does she come to terms with her power and take responsibility for her ability to impact on others. Seeing true humility in Mr. Troy's willingness to sing a hymn to her, she thinks, "He should sing always, and never speak" (291), thus recognizing the power of voice in art rather than in the everyday language which never serves to open communications for her. Even though she goes on "speaking in the same way" (293), she offers kindness and a blessing of acceptance to Marvin and his long-suffering wife, Doris.

There has been much critical discussion of the moment of spiritual conversion which Hagar experiences at Shadow point. David Williams says that "Hagar's eyes are opened . . . . Murray shows her a well of forgiveness in her wilderness of pride" ("Jacob" 92) and Hans Hauge calls "the episode a rewriting of the parable of the Good Samaritan" (130) in which Hagar learns the importance of the ninth commandment to love thy neighbour. Hagar's escape to Shadow Point, where she descends "the steps that lead down and down" (148), seems to parallel the biblical Hagar's journey into the desert. Like the biblical Hagar, who Laurence says "was intended only as a sort of echo" (Sullivan 68), the novel's heroine goes into the wilderness to seek solace and exert her power of independence. The idea of woman descending into nature to find her true self is part of the Canadian tradition, as evidenced not only in the nineteenth-century works of Catherine Parr Traill and Susannah Moodie, but also in Atwood's *Surfacing*, Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, Joan Barfoot's *Abra*, Jane Urquhart's *Away*, and even Constance Beresford-Howe's *Book of Eve*- (although Beresford-Howe's heroine makes her descent into an *urban* wilderness). The common thread is the need to walk away from what is considered civilized, what is man-constructed, and seek a kind of re-birth or re-vision from the earth. Paradise regained.

Hagar's encounter with nature, in keeping with a romantic tradition, is both earthly and sublime. After spending the night in an abandoned cannery, Hagar awakens to a great thirst and the words of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* ringing in her head: "Water water everywhere nor any drop to drink. That's my predicament" (186). She identifies with the ancient mariner both in age and in predicament, but is not sure of her sin: "What albatross did I slay for mercy's sake? Well, well, we'll see–come on old mariner, up and out of your smelly bunk" (186). That she parallels herself with the mariner does imply that she has a story which must be told if her soul is to be freed.

What Hagar finds is a "rusty and dinted [sic] bucket" of rain water with the help of sparrows: "I've always liked the sparrows. And now they've led me here, and here's my well in the wilderness" (186-7). Like the mariner, who dreamt the buckets on deck "were filled with dew;/And when I awoke, it rained" (ll. 299-300), she is aided by nature's forces. And, like the biblical Hagar, she here learns important truths about her descendants and is sent back to an oppressive household by an angel, in this case Murray F. Lees.

Hagar relates to Murray F. Lees when he describes his experience as a "Redeemer's Advocate," initiated by his grandfather: "The brand of salvation he sold was firewater, nothing meek about it, believe you me. It might be hard to swallow but you sure felt good once it was down" (225). It is Murray's involvement with the tabernacle that ultimately, and ironically–considering the apocalyptic nature of the sect–leads to his son's death. Fed up with the preacher's obsession with predicting the date of doom, Murray had left his wife in the tabernacle and gone home where the child had been left alone, only to find "the moon turned dark and the stars gone wild" (233)–the madness of a Van Gough–his own personal Armageddon. His house had caught fire and his son burned to death.

When Hagar hears this story she is changed. At the Eucharistic banquet of wine and biscuits among the fishnets she is "bid" (now, like Coleridge's wedding guest) "by the plain and urgent silence to Listen. You must listen" (232). And having truly listened, she finally knows another's suffering, which opens her heart of stone:

> I can think of only one thing to say with any meaning.
> "I had a son," I say, "and lost him."
> "Well," he says abruptly, "then you know." (234)

This is the first time we see Hagar as not being alone. She and Murray "sit quietly in this place, empty except for ourselves" (234), which seems more intimate than even her lovemaking with her husband.

Hagar's encounter with the light-bearing Lees frees her from the curse of inner silence, just as the Mariner is freed of the albatross (which prevents his progress and kills his shipmates) by having a spontaneous display of empathy for other earthly creatures first thought repulsive.

Hagar is "unaware" that she tells Murray F. Lees the story of her son's death, the guilt of which has weighed her down for over twenty years:

> "Have I been saying it all aloud?"
> "It's okay," he says. "It's quite okay. Do you good to tell it."
> As though it were worms, to be purged. But no matter. His voice is friendly. I'm glad he's here. I'm not sorry I've talked to him, not sorry at all, and that's remarkable. (245)

It is only after this closeness with Murray that Hagar, like the mariner, has some grace to pray: "He pulls the blanket up around me. I could even beg God's pardon at this moment, for thinking ill of Him some time or other" (248). But, also like the mariner, she only says that she *could* pray, not that she *does*.

As the Mariner must tell his tale, so must Hagar: "And till my ghastly tale is told, / This heart within me burns" (ll. 484-5). Murray F. Lees, like the wedding guest who must hear the tale, becomes "A sadder and a wiser man /

when he rose the morrow morn" (ll. 624-5). The implement for opening the bottled-up Hagar is simply another person with a similar story, in surroundings that defy any kind of propriety. In the end, then, Hagar is empowered simply by being able to speak the truth and be heard without inciting punishment or judgment, something that did not happen in her father's house.

Both the woods, with its "rotten boughs, ... decayed wood and leaf mold" (190), and the massive cannery, a place of remnants and oddities housing "sagging curtains . . ., discarded fishing nets . . . [and] a derelict fishboat" (215), seem to reflect Hagar's physical and spiritual states. The images are rich with objects whose prime is spent and which are being absorbed back into the earth. In the cannery Hagar creates her own angelic garland of death out of dead June bugs, "unearthed jewels still green and luminous . . . their bellies shimmer[ing] with pure copper" (216), an act Evelyn Hinz sees as evocative of a shift from "logos to Eros, Christian to pagan" (21). She replaces her "prim domestic hat with the jade and copper pieces in [her] hair, and feels transform[ed]"; she has become "queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs" (216). Here is Hagar at her most resplendent, ruling the insect kingdom. Her identification with the moths, June bugs, and earwigs indicates where she feels she fits in the hierarchy of animals and the kind of power she feels vested with. But at least in the pagan realm she has *some* power, something Christianity could not provide.

Paralleling Hagar's fall from grace in her community, she physically falls in the forest : "And then I do fall. My feet slip, both together, on a clump of wet moss, and I'm down (191). She grows "enraged" at her helplessness, "stuck here like an overturned ladybug" until she pulls herself upright with "a bough," as though the trees themselves are reaching to assist her. She is proud that she could get up alone: "Proud as Napoleon or Lucifer, I stand and survey the wasteland I've conquered" (191). That Hagar compares herself to the eighteenth century "little corporal" of military genius and to the archangel hurled from heaven in the same breath is indicative both of the lack of female role models of strength and of her sense of relative accomplishment. Also, using Lucifer, Laurence would have been aware of the triple meaning behind it: besides the rebellious archangel, Lucifer is Latin for "light-bearing" and alludes to the planet Venus as the morning star. And this particular morning, Hagar tells us, is "light and calm, clean and gold" (196). Hagar as Venus seems appropriate in some ways–especially if one pictures the Venus de Milo, a statue well known in art history, aligning her again with something ancient and powerful and pagan.

Hagar's ability to embrace the natural elements, the earth and its crumbling structures, of which she is one, sharply contrasts with her father's encounter with nature, which causes destruction even after his death:

> Within a year, Currie Memorial Park was started beside the Wachakwa river. The scrub oak was uprooted and the couchgrass mown, and nearly circular beds of petunias

> proclaimed my father's immortality in mauve and pink frilled petals. (63-4)

It seems somehow appropriate that strong and natural elements are uprooted in his name and replaced with cultivated frilliness, just as he attempted to do with Hagar.

When Hagar finally ends up in the hospital, surrounded by other dying old women, she realizes how rarely she ever did "speak the heart's truth" (292) and forms some sense of community with others of her own sex. She is released from much of her anger and unbidden lies when she acts kindly towards an Oriental girl, as though somehow making up for the money she inherited from Mr. Oatley's endeavors. Fetching a bed-pan for the bedridden girl, Hagar's flesh quivers and her muscles "prance and jerk" (300) in rebellion, but she does it and says she is "Quite-okay" afterwards, smiling at her first-time use of such a "slangy" word as "okay." Hagar has rarely, if ever, acted out of kindness before in her life, but instead always out of rebellion or survival. Now she is somehow freed through her participation in community and recognition of humanity, somewhat like the Mariner when he recognizes the beauty of all creatures.

Hagar confesses her weakness and her fears to her surviving son-another first: "I'm-frightened. Marvin, I'm so frightened" (303), and speaks a final truth that still seems like a lie to her in saying that Marvin has been "a better son than John" (304).

Sandra Djwa believes that Hagar's death-bed reference to herself as an angel and the "implications of the cup of grace at the end of the novel . . . reinforce our sense that her metamorphosis is complete and that Hagar has received her covenant" (76). Most critics recognize Hagar's transformation, but focus on the Christian aspect of it and overlook or choose to ignore the spiritual elements based in the nature and animal imagery. There are a few exceptions to this. D.G. Jones notices that towards the end of the novel Hagar rediscovers "her identification with the land and the minute, teeming life of nature" (163), and Evelyn Hinz takes on the topic squarely and insistently, pointing out that Hagar missed rituals of atonement and exorcism in her essentially Protestant upbringing and proposing that

> To provide these is Laurence's purpose in having Hagar escape to an old fish cannery where she encounters a seedy "life assurance" salesman, just as Laurence herein recovers the pagan or Dionysian figure of the redeemer and his cults which lie beyond or have degenerated into the more Apollonian Christian signature. Significantly, the episode takes the form of a descent to "Shadow Point," which would seem to imply both that it is not consciousness-*raising* but *lowering* that modern women need, and that such lowering needs to have a religious dimension. (87)

As Anne Vimtrup points out, "Hagar-the-hag, the crone-does not move very much beyond exile" (87) in this novel. She struggles and rages throughout, perhaps less against the *dying* of the light than against the *lighting* of the light. Hagar only recognizes that she has any positive power-for example, the ability to provide comfort, love and acceptance-or clear vision, on her death bed. Throughout her life, her spirit and her power have been

wasted in trying to control others and protect herself; her blindness–for "God gave me eyes but not sight" (174)–is relieved only when she is trying to escape care, as when she flees the nursing home, "Gifted with sight like a prowling cat" (105). Right to the bitter end Hagar fights for control, as she "wrest[s]" the glass, perhaps the grail, of water from Doris' hands to drink "or spill it, just as I choose" (308). This is her final act, with the novel ending in mid-sentence indicating, to most readers, her death.

Hagar is undoubtedly imbued with Christian tradition and morality, to the extent that Evelyn Hinz believes that "all of the protagonist's problems are shown to stem from the religious climate in which she has been raised" (18). Hagar also shows awareness of the hypocrisy within the church, even though she is comforted by it, finally, which demonstrates the extent to which we are influenced by our early religious training–just as the natives in Laurence's African fiction are never able to erase their pagan belief systems, neither is Hagar able to shake her early indoctrination. She is tied in her heart to Christianity, even though she knows intellectually it does not grant her power or vision, both of which she achieves to some extent when she explores the more pagan, or natural, world in the wilderness.

Like *The Diviners'* Morag, Hagar made some difficult life choices: the motherless daughter rejects the family she is raised in to marry a man on the opposite end of the social scale; she eventually leaves her husband and focuses on her child(ren). As children, both Morag and Hagar were told stories of their ancestors. However, the stories Hagar's father told her were of conquest by the men of the clan, while the stories Christie told Morag of her heritage not only had a heroine, but the heroine's name was Morag. Hagar has no models of power other than masculine ones, and her own attempts at duplicating this power, exerting control over others, have ended in disaster, as evidenced by the death of her beloved John. There are no strong or admirable female characters for Hagar to look up to, and no gods or goddesses who embrace or encourage her own vigorous nature. Laurence's first Manawaka heroine takes her first steps towards spiritual freedom on her deathbed. The next protagonist, Rachel, emerges from a funeral parlour.

Rachel's pain is as real as Leonard Cohen's.
Margaret Laurence (Wainwright, *Soul*, 45)

How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones.
Samuel Beckett (*Happy Days*)

Chapter 4
A Jest of God

Elizabeth Waterston says that Laurence creates a "rich, mysterious, [and] funny world" in *A Jest of God*, where "she keys into an archetypal force like that released through folklore or myth" (83). In this novel, Rachel struggles with her relationship to the Christian god as she evolves from the secular but godlike "thin giant She behind the desk" (*Jest* 7) to one of the "chosen" speakers in tongues in the tabernacle where she is terrorized by her own voice to become, finally, a raging "prophetess" (209) singing psalms beyond her conscious memory. God is presented sometimes as a dreaded power and sometimes as a humanist, and, as the title of the novel suggests, sometimes as a frivolous prankster. But always, it seems, he is a force *outside* of Rachel–even when he apparently takes over her voice. Rachel's transformation, which, like Hagar's, involves a descent and a blessing, leaves her with new power and new vision, perhaps *granted* by the outside God, but allowing her a role of authority she could not have imagined in the beginning of the novel. In this chapter I will discuss how religious issues seem to actualize themselves in Rachel's physical self, so that we can see how her struggle to gain control over her body and her conscious mind are often rooted in Christian ideals. As well, I will look at how the seemingly secret language of little-girl skipping rhymes reflects ancient power structures and the concept of motherhood as power–in biblical and contemporary times.

Two very different types of Christianity are presented in this novel: first, the "gaudiness and zeal" (47) in the tabernacle and, second, the staid propriety in the church of her mother. The two conventional methods of worship are sharply contrasted, with the United Church displaying in tasteful stained glass "a pretty and clean-cut Jesus expiring gently with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain, just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman . . ." (47), while the more primal tabernacle presents a grippingly vivid portrayal:

"Two large pictures are hanging, both Jesus, bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns, like a scarlet pincushion" (36). In one instance Jesus, like the parishioners, shows no emotion and seems to be accepting happily his sacrificial death; in the other he suffers gory exposure and, one imagines, even screams fevered emotions.

Rachel's "sweetly nagging hypochondriac of a mother, who plays guilt like a violin" (Atwood, "Afterword" 214), reflects the values of her church, glossing over pain with false cheerfulness, while Rachel's co-worker Calla, who willingly reveals her joys and disappointments, more closely resembles the values of the tabernacle, which calls upon its members to expose their emotions and their wounds. George Bowering notes Rachel's

> curious suspension in her attitudes toward the two churches. She can feel superior to the uppity Protestants who want their church to be bloodless and quiet, but she herself squirms with embarrassment at the very thought of being seen in the Pentecostal tabernacle.
>
> ("That Fool" 213)

The effects of these dueling religions on Rachel are complex: she is all her life oppressed by the values of the Protestant church, then is unwillingly freed by Pentecostalism. I would disagree with what Sandra Djwa refers to as the "false gods" of the established religions (they are as real, in their effectiveness, as any gods), but concede that Rachel does come up with something like a "new covenant" (82) in her search for a benevolent higher power.

The god most familiar to Rachel inhabits the confines of her mother's church, where speaking is forbidden by anyone except the minister, and gifts of the spirit are kept at arm's length. It is here that St. Paul's influence seems most profound: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" (1 Timothy 2:8). Ironically, Calla, who yearns to have the gift of tongues, to speak aloud in the church, finds solace in his teachings. She seems oblivious to his direct instruction that "It is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Cor. 14:34). Perhaps this is a reflection of Laurence's own inclinations, for Al Purdy says, "she admired [St. Paul] despite chauvinism" (Wainwright *Soul* 154). Even though, in comparison to other existing systems, early Christian theory seemed egalitarian, it was fed by "Texts from the Roman law [which] were used to justify the Greco-Jewish bent for keeping women away from public functions (for example, the priesthood) and subordinate to the male" (O'Faolain 128). St. Paul is largely credited with solidifying a subservient role for women within Christianity.

Rachel is accustomed to being controlled, by others and by herself, and cannot imagine any benefits to inviting the chaos of Babylonian speaking. She has what Djwa calls an "overly strict super-ego" (71). When she goes with Calla to the tabernacle, "almost as large as though the place had been a proper church" (36), she is brought from her airy existence into a powerful reality. Instead of her lucid fear that Calla will suddenly rise up and keen "like the Grecian women wild on the hills" (37), it is her own voice that is "dragged from the crypt" (42), and, in an almost orgasmic build-up, she speaks "the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense" (42). Aritha van Herk quite bluntly parallels the "Eulalia" with "a woman's cry at the moment of orgasm"

(133), suggesting that God's jest in this novel is "not death, the breath of mortality, but desire" (133). Whatever is held in that forbidden ancient non-language which rewarded the dwellers of Babel, Rachel is the least anxious to find out. Rather than embrace this gift, this "power," as Calla calls it, Rachel is horrified. She detests "hysteria" and is "so ashamed" (44) to have spoken at all, especially at a level of consciousness which seems beyond her control. Perhaps, too, part of that shame is the knowledge of the taboo of women speaking in a church in any language, let alone one of the "chosen" ones. As Vanessa later discovers in *A Bird in the House*, Rachel has some inkling that "whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order" (*Bird* 61). Rachel imagines, in the tabernacle, biblical scenes of verbal confusion, "each crying aloud his own words, no one hearing anyone else" (42) and considers how the hymn being sung seems to celebrate it:

> Let us celebrate confusion. God is not the author of confusion but of peace. What a laugh. Let the Dionysian women rend themselves on the night hills and consume the god. (42)

The "Dionysian women," the frenzied and/or undisciplined women, are invited to gobble up the god who pretends to offer peace. This is an obviously rebellious action which involves a pre-Christian coup where wild women take over the presumably male god.

The reader never finds out what Rachel says when she speaks in tongues--nor does she--but we know it is something primal and can assume that it might cause chaos if it were heard. Rachel is appalled at the lack of integrity between her body, soul, and mind. The episode in the tabernacle epitomizes the false-front she presents in her everyday life concerning speech and physical awareness: she rarely says what she means or acts on what she feels. And surely this is one of God's great jests--to make her the recipient of the "gift" of tongues when it is her greatest fear.

Rachel's lack of physical control is further revealed when her favoured pupil James shyly refuses to reveal his schoolwork:

> "Have you finished your subtraction questions, James?"
> No voice. I cannot get any response. . .
> *Crack!* (58)

Her body reacts involuntarily to his refusal to speak, just as it reacted to her own refusal to speak. She is horrified that she strikes him in the face, causing his nose to bleed, but still cannot speak the necessary words: "*James--I'm sorry.* But I haven't spoken the words aloud" (59). She becomes acutely aware of the limitations of words to repair physical damage: "I don't think I could ever say anything which might make him forget" (60). Rachel's lack of control over her body clearly indicates the extent to which she has dis-integrated: her body, mind and spirit act neither in unison nor under her command. This is a good example of what Susan Bordo describes as an age-old conflict between the body and the self:

> what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom . . .) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. (5)

It seems that Rachel's body is undermining her "best efforts" to appear as one who shows no emotions.

That Rachel's actions and thoughts are unsynchronized in her treatment of James is particularly poignant when one considers an often quoted verse from the book of James in the Bible: "[F]aith, if it hath not works, is dead" (2:14-26). This verse calls upon Christians to behave according to their beliefs: it is not enough to think good and holy thoughts; one must act in a corresponding manner. Rachel finds this almost impossible.

While knowledge of the biblical story of Rachel is not necessary to appreciate this novel, there is no doubt of its adding depth to the interpretation, especially since God is a fairly active character here. Rachel appears in Genesis 30:1-24, where the story is told of how she and her older sister Leah both become wives to Jacob, though his preference for Rachel is clear. However, as Alice Laffey tells us, "as fate, or luck, or God, would have it, Rachel remained barren while Leah produced four sons" (35). Because the patriarchal system was such that a wife's status grew according to her ability to produce children, Rachel seeks this reward by ingesting a mandrake potion, after which she has a son of her own. She never really catches up with Leah, though, who in time bears seven children. Rachel's desire to have her own children is clearly echoed in *A Jest of God*. She is conscious of the uncommon emotion she feels towards her students that signals the inappropriateness of calling them "my children" (8), even though Calla does the same; the difference is that "the words are no threat to her. She feels only a rough amused affection and irritation towards any or all of them, equally" (8). She even posits herself as the biblical patriarch Noah in her role as protector of the children: "They troop in, two by two, all the young animals into my Ark" (161). But Rachel loves certain ones–this year it is James–passionately, to the extent that she feels more competent than the child's own mother: "She doesn't deserve to have him" (31). Deep down Rachel wants to have her own child with Nick, as is revealed by her disappointment upon finding she is not pregnant, even though she had contemplated seeking an "angel maker," an abortionist, who might give her the magic potion to end her pregnancy. While the biblical Rachel may have sought children in order to heighten her social status, Rachel Cameron seems to desire the *right* to love a child without reservation.

Calla's silent canary, named Jacob "because he climbs the ladder all the time" (143), reflects the biblical Jacob (Rachel's husband) who builds a tower in Babylon trying to reach the heavens, a presumption to which God responds by taking away the builders' abilities to speak in the same language. The "babel" that they are left with is echoed in Rachel's "glossolalia," and in her namesake niece, Jennifer Rachel, who "babbles" incoherently throughout *The Fire-Dwellers*.

In the Bible the focus on women attaining power through motherhood is very real, as is the lack of women's spoken voices. The Rachel Laurence presents in *A Jest of God* –unmarried, childless, fatherless–is perceived by her society as having less power and position than a woman, say, in her sister Stacey's place, with three children and a "successful" husband. And while, as a

teacher, Rachel is in a public position of speaking, her audience is children. As a single woman, Rachel is also denied any socially acceptable sexual activity, which, coupled with living with her mother, serves to keep her in a state of seemingly prolonged virginal adolescence.

Rachel's relationship with her own body, namely her lack of power over it, seems to shame her constantly. Her body acts independently from her intellect and exposes her desire. She is in constant denial of her physical needs and desires, which are so repressed that they crop up unexpectedly and uncontrollably. Even the "spotted furry hands" of the "reptilian" school principal, Willard Siddley, appeal to her sensually starved self: "I wanted to touch them. To see what the hairs felt like. Yet he repulses me" (15). However, her amazingly talkative super-ego asserts itself to keep all physical contact at bay: "I won't. I didn't feel that way. I'm only imagining things again" (15).

Rachel's fears are visualized in her "waking nightmare" (24) (a term borrowed from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), where her body loses control:

> I can see myself at school, years from now, never fully awake, in a constant dozing and drowsing sitting at my desk, my head bobbing slowly up and down, my mouth gradually falling open without my knowing it, and people seeing and whispering . . . . (23-4)

Like Coleridge's female "nightmare LIFE-IN-DEATH" (line 193), Rachel is "unable to anchor" herself, unable "to stop thinking" (24). From this she moves to a Harlequin-romance-like dream world as she tries to get to sleep, which serves as a masturbation fantasy resulting in guilt and denial: "I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be able to sleep" (25). The guilt, the "hell on wheels" (24), is undoubtedly of religious origin. Even though Rachel often takes on a contemptuous tone in her reference to religious morality, she is still obviously affected by it:

> [Mother] used to tell me over and over how my misdemeanours wounded her. They also hurt Jesus, as I recollect. Well, poor Jesus. No doubt He weathered it better than I did.(84)

That the church upholds the male order of the patriarchy is also evident in the reference she makes to a hymn which bids women not to "awaken love until it please" (138) the master, much in the same way she feels she is not supposed to call upon Nick according to the societal rules of the day. When she does call him, he says,

> "Yes?" Just like that. A business reply. Don't phone me–I'll phone you. *I adjure you. O daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awaken love, until it please.* (137-8)

When Rachel loses her virginity to Nick, she is again aware of the separation of body and mind:

> I can't help this shuddering that is not desire, that's something I don't understand. I don't want to be this way. It's only my muscles, my skin, my nerves severed from myself, nothing to do with what I want to be.

(98)

It is, however, through the sexual act with the serpent-like Nick, who "slither[s] out of his grey flannels like a snake shrugging off its last year's skin" (97), that Rachel begins to gain a sense of autonomy. Like Eve, her knowledge of the world is increased by her "sinful" act. Before this, her status as a child is emphasized. Calla calls her "child," and her mother treats her like one, asking when she will be home and where she is going. Somehow the sex act becomes a catalyst that causes a chain of events leading Rachel out of her child's world and into something more like adulthood. Ironically, the societal term *loss* of virginity is, for Rachel and many other women, really a gain. The loss is only one of ignorance. She is, of course, duly punished, just as promised in Genesis: "I got the curse this week" (139).

Rachel's actual sexual encounters with Nick, set in fields of green, are only slightly less fantastical than her fantasies. Their first rendezvous is in a pastoral, Eden-like, setting: in a field, by a river, under a full moon, they lie on the grass. Nick, who has chosen this particular spot, admits, when Rachel says it's "natural to want to see some place you've been fond of," that he doesn't "have a clue what's natural and what's unnatural" (92), indicating an Adam-like conscious lack of knowledge. Nick talks of his grandmother, whom he describes as "a female warrior-type and sour as a crabapple" (95). There is a slight inversion here, if we follow the Eden analogy, where Nick seems to represent both the beguiling serpent and the innocent Adam, who found the "crabapple" (an uncultivated fruit) to be sour. Nick, like Adam, would happily obey the god that requires him to shake off all knowledge of his Ukrainian past, fulfilling Jago's comment that he "don't remember nothing" (151) from being raised on the farm. Meanwhile, Rachel, like the much maligned Eve, is eager to taste forbidden knowledge.

Another time Rachel and Nick make love on "the green edge of a brown river" (149) in the couch grass, where Nick talks about his father "creating the world in his own image" (148). His mother, who is "solid," both "physically and spiritually," is also an "oracle" who "believes in omens":

> "She's got this marvelous belief in her own intuition . . . where her kids are concerned. Something magical, she thinks, given by heaven to mothers like her . . . " (151)

The religious imagery surrounding Nick's parents places them in something of an Eden-like setting themselves, coming as they do to a new country and creating their own world there with "magical" gifts from heaven.

Even though her nervous relationship with Nick is more like that of a school girl than a mature woman, Rachel finds something changed in herself after he, like an irresponsible teenager, leaves Manawaka without saying good-bye. Like Hagar, Rachel is freed when her pride–her fear of community judgment–leaves her: "No, I have no pride. None left, not now. This realization renders me all at once calm, inexplicably, and almost free. Have I finished with façades?" (148). She is reduced–or one could say elevated–to this through her conscious desire for Nick. In this way, the relationship paradoxically removes her power–i.e. her ability to control herself–yet enhances it at the same time.

Rachel's relationships with females (Calla, mother, sister) are even more frustrated than those with males (Willard, James, father, Nick). While the relationships with males are all dictated by desire–to touch or become connected with, physically and emotionally–those with females are surrounded by the instinct to flee or be separate from. Though it is not entirely clear whether Rachel's coworker Calla is a lesbian or just an over-zealous physically affectionate type, Rachel constantly tries to distance herself from their friendship. After her experience of speaking at the tabernacle, Rachel admits to Calla that she is both ashamed and afraid: "I'm–oh, Calla, I'm so damn frightened" (44). What might be an intimate moment of female bonding, however, turns into a defense:

> "Rachel, honey," she says, "it practically kills me to see you like this." Then, as though unpremeditated, she kisses my face and swiftly afterwards my mouth. My drawing away is sharp, violent. I feel violated, unclean, as though I would strike her dead if I had the means. (44)

Rachel bolts from Calla's apartment: "Once I am outside I can begin running" (44). Her emotional and physical reaction is severe. The sense of repulsion has been described before with Willard Siddley, yet Rachel wanted to touch him. With Calla she wants to kill. This may be fear of lesbianism–that she could "be Calla's way, without knowing it" (89), or perhaps Calla is too strongly associated with the tabernacle, a place where Rachel's powerlessness was far too intense: at least in her relationships with men she maintains consciousness. Interestingly, a "calla" is a type of lily often used in funeral arrangements, perhaps implying a fear of death on Rachel's part. Ultimately, though, it seems to be the profound mistrust of her own self-knowledge that terrifies her.

Rachel's relationship with her mother is certainly the most disempowering of all. From the time her father dies Rachel becomes the caretaker of her mother, yet she continues to behave as a child in many ways, and follows her mother "like some lean greyhound being led out for a walk" (46). The old woman seems to represent all aspects of what Jung called the negative side of the mother archetype: "the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (qtd. by Buss, 9). Indeed, Rachel refers to her once as "the Angel of Death" (100), and even goes so far as to wish her dead: "Why can't she die and leave me alone?" (120). It seems that every other sentence Rachel speaks to her mother is prefaced with "I'm sorry." The old woman's power to manipulate and control Rachel's life is pervasive. Aritha van Herk suggests that "It is not of great consequence *what* Rachel says. What matters is *how*, and more importantly, *that* she says or speaks at all" (Gunnars xiii). I would disagree. There is significance in the fact that Rachel moves, both in tone and in statements, from apologetic ("I'm sorry") to declarative ("Let me come in") to commandeering ("No, Mother"). As Lois Gottlieb and Wendy Keitner see it, Rachel moves from being "bound to her mother like Persephone to Demeter" to "the Artemis prototype with the goal of her own wholeness" (28).

The Artemis in Rachel seems more geared towards discoveries of ***human***

nature than *mother* nature, such as when Rachel suggests subjects for the children's drawings: "Did anyone find any pussywillows?" (11). The "chorus of response" comes "from the girls, of course." Interestingly, Rachel notices how the "very young girls [are] often so anxious to please that they will tell lies without really knowing they're doing it" (11), yet she fails to match the analogy to her own behavior moments earlier where she admires a "horrible" necklace of Calla's "out of politeness" (10) and ends up having to wear it. Like the little girls, and her mother, she says what others want to hear instead of what she truly feels.[1] The necklace, of "polished pink stones," is a temporary albatross, a punishment for her sin. She becomes part of the atmosphere of oppression for her students, just as the school and the principal, Willard, are for her. Rachel's participation in the execution of the authoritarian rules that she personally finds wrongheaded is exemplified when she strikes James with her "ruler," and when she must send him to the principal for punishment.

Margaret Atwood says in her "Afterword" to *A Jest of God* that Rachel's prison, partly of her own making, "is smaller and more tightly locked" (213) than those of Laurence's other protagonists. Rachel indeed seems closely caged, like Calla's canary, who does not talk or fly, but runs up and down, up and down. Not outspoken like the aged Hagar, Rachel keeps her mind to herself, speaking less to God or humans than Stacey does. Most of Rachel's dialogue is to herself or to a fantasy Nick, to whom she can speak much more freely than she can with the real flesh-and-blood-Nick. At one point, when she fantasizes a romantic conversation with Nick, she finds herself conversing instead with God, whom she perceives as looking down on her and laughing: "All right, God–go ahead and laugh, and I'll laugh with you, but not quite yet for a while. Rachel, stop it" (121). Even though God takes over this internal conversation from Nick, someone Rachel believes has a "fantastic way . . . of creating the world in his own image" (148), Nick is not willing to take over for God; when Rachel replicates her biblical namesake, thinking of Nick as someone to "*Give me my children*" (Genesis 30:1 & *Jest* 154), he tells her, "I'm not God" (154), thereby reducing any hope she has that the god she desires can be substituted by man.

The struggle to escape childhood and to fulfill her societal roles as an adult woman is ambiguous for Rachel, who still finds comfort and fantasy in the overheard children's skipping rhyme which opens the novel, her imagination placing her in the romantic position of the handsome, desirous, queen:

> *The wind blows low, the wind blows high*
> *The snow comes falling from the sky,*
> *Rachel Cameron says she'll die*
> *For the want of the golden city.*
> *She is handsome , she is pretty,*
> *She is the queen of the golden city–* (7)

Rachel is intensely aware of the power of song, of words and of the voice to

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[1] Rachel is unable to participate in the "revolution of female manners" (45) that Mary Wollstonecraft said was necessary in the 1700's if women were to rise above their state of polite subservience.

speak them. She recalls as a child being "scared of not pleasing . . . the thin giant She behind the desk at the front, the one with the power of picking any colored chalk out of the box and writing anything at all on the blackboard" (7). Having the power to write anything, in any color, "seemed a power worth possessing, then" (7). It has become clear to her as an adult that the "power" to control others from behind a desk is one often riddled with discomfort and indecision. Unlike principal Siddley, Rachel gets no pleasure from disciplining others. She has come to realize that some other kind of power is necessary for her to have control over herself. That the skipping song triggers this awareness is significant: children's play rhymes are often intense and ancient, with no formal construction or lineage from the adult community. They seem to exist and proliferate without any adult interception, yet they often reflect current social policy. They exist almost entirely in orality and rhyme passed mysteriously from generation to generation without ever appearing on paper, which in itself undercuts Rachel's thoughts about the importance of writing with the chalk–although chalk leaves only a temporary mark. Interestingly, a version of the rhyme that opens this novel was recorded in 1990 on an award-winning album by the Rankin Family under the title "Tell My Ma," showing its artistic appeal to large audiences and its resilience.

Rachel is aware of how these songs seem to reappear magically in children: "People forget the songs, later on, but the knowledge of them must be passed like a secret language from child to child–how far back?" (7-8). The songs resemble the story-telling practices of the African traditions, as well as the North American natives, or any other culture where the *written* word has not yet taken control over "the word" in general.

There are three skipping songs quoted in the first two pages of the novel: the first proclaims its selected heroine as possessing the traditional woman's powers of beauty, as well as a political position as reigning monarch:

She is handsome, she is pretty,
She is the queen of the golden city– (7)

Obviously, this rhyme endows the chosen child with a sense of power and grace. However, the other two rhymes sharply contrast the subject/object, and place the singers in positions of "power-over":

Spanish dancers, turn around,
Spanish dancers, get out of this town. (7)

Here the singers shift from granting power and prestige to the dancer (the skipper) to abolishing her: if memory serves me–for I did skip to this rhyme–the rope turners speed up when they say "get out of town" to make it more difficult for the dancer to stay.

The third rhyme leaps from "power over" to an undermining attack on character, rather than a physical ousting:

Nebuchadnezzar[2]*, King of the Jews*
Sold his wife for a pair of shoes.

I can imagine that one going back and back, through time and languages. Chanted in Latin maybe, the same high sing-song voices,

---

[2] Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylonia (c.605-562 B.C.), thereby tying in the theme of religion and scrambled language, resulting in lack of communication, once again.

smug little Roman girls safe inside some villa. (8)

Rachel's perception of a "secret language" being passed on in the seeming innocence of young girls is astute. She recognizes how prejudices and power move from one generation to the next without conspicuous directives from adults, and how the songs pass on more than just words. The songs depict methods of granting and of taking away power, and it is the rope turners and the singers who have the power to effect change for the person who skips. As long as one wants to be part of the skipping community, one is at the mercy of the singers, the ones with the words. Rachel has allowed herself to remain at the mercy of other people's words well into her adult life, seemingly unaware that she has the power to speak herself.

Just as Freud, and later, Lacan, point out the importance of *speaking* words as opposed to thinking or writing them in order to fully grasp their depth as signifiers, Laurence seems to be pointing out the importance of speaking, expressing oneself orally in order to attain personal recognition of self and depth of character. Hagar almost never spoke the truth of her feelings or perceptions. Rachel, during the course of the novel, progresses from trying to "turn off" the voices in her head to allowing them out, first against her will, and later at her bidding. This movement to the place where thoughts, actions and words coalesce to form voice and power (not over others but over self) seems to be the point of the novel. That the voice of God is really a voice within is perhaps part of the jest–and part of "God's mercy on reluctant jesters" (209).

The integration of power, desire and voice arrives more than halfway through the novel when Rachel, believing herself to be pregnant and deserted, goes , most uncharacteristically, downstairs in the middle of the night to visit the undertaker, Hector Jonas, who took over the family business when Rachel's father died. This descent, "leading down to the ground" to the large door of "Ye Olde Dungeon, as in a Disney film" (125) marks Rachel's acceptance of "pridelessness" (126), much as Hagar's descent to Shadow Point marks her acceptance, and with it, a transformation. Rachel recognizes the peculiar freshness of her approach, saying, "It's a crazy time of night to come down, Hector" (125). This scene is widely discussed by critics. Aritha van Herk points out how Hector, as "mortician/God/lover/father" (142), gives Rachel the confidence to reveal her weakness as he does his, resulting in their "joint confession" (142). C.M. McLay says that "the turning point in her movement away from death and back to life occurs in the scene with Hector in the Japonica Chapel, where she relinquishes her hold upon the past" (185). Nora Stovel calls their meeting a "ritual libation" (*Rachel's Children* 41) and parody of "resurrection" where Hector and Rachel drink, sing and weep together, after which "Rachel is ready to return to reality and climb the stairs out of Hades back to life" (Stovel 42). The potent religious imagery in this encounter cannot be ignored, and attests to its importance in Rachel's new consciousness. Even though she claims several times to be a non-believer, feeling that God died "a long time ago, longer than I could remember," and that she "could not actually recall a time when He was alive" (45), she does pray to him when she is feeling desperate to reconnect with Nick, asking, "Please, God, let him

phone" (101). Then, like Hagar, she critiques her conduct:

> I don't know why a person pleads with God. If I believed, the last kind of a Creator I could imagine would be a human-type Being who could be reached by tears or bribed by words. (101)

Eventually, though, in a scene reminiscent of St. Paul being struck from his horse, or St. Joan (of Arc) kneeling to the sound of her voices, we find Rachel "on [her] knees," after aborting a suicide attempt brought on by her fears of pregnancy, abandonment, and unbearable shame. What is remarkable here is the intensity of her resentment that she must, finally, seek assistance from the god she has protested against for so long, though her protest was perhaps more against the *forms* of worship offered to her than the object of it. In any case, she is absolutely desperate before she calls on "Him":

> I am not praying–if that is what I am doing–out of belief. Only out of need. Not faith, or belief, or the feeling of deserving anything. None of that seems to be so.
>
> *Help me.*
>
> Help–if You will–me. Whoever that may be. And whoever You are, or where. . . .
>
> We seem to have fought for a long time, I and You.
>
> The ones who don't have anyone else, turn to You–don't you [sic] think I know? All the nuts and oddballs to You. Last resort. Don't you [sic] think I know? (177)

Intellectually, she does not *believe* in God, but emotionally she *needs* one. She is aware that there is no one on earth, in the flesh, who can help her, yet she must find power somewhere in order to survive. She must use her voice to ask for help, even though she has not heard his voice:

> If You have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If You have a voice it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush, no pillar of sand by day or pillar of flame by night. (177)

Yet, amazingly, and regardless of the fact that she believes herself "demented," she does seem to receive guidance; it is immediately after this complaint that Rachel makes what is undoubtedly the most courageous and difficult decision of her life with what seems like absolute certainty: "Look–it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else" (177). It may have been her descent and re-surfacing with Hector that gave her her voice, but it is here that she uses it for the first time to really speak for herself. Even though what Rachel thought was a fetus turns out to be only a benign tumor, her strength of decision-making stays with her, empowering her to stand up to her mother and resolve her stagnant life by choosing to quit her job and move to Vancouver, the "golden city" of which she may be queen.

In her anger at Dr. Raven for suggesting that "a sensible girl like yourself" (184) could not possibly be pregnant, she thinks: "No words for my anger could ever be foul or wounding enough. . . . I could hurl at him a voice as berserk as any car crash" (184). And thinking of the possibilities for her potential child, she considers its voice: "It will have a voice. It will be able to cry out" (169). Interestingly, six years later, in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*,

her narrator takes the opposite approach to her unborn child: "I will never teach it any words" (173), but with a similar motive, which is to protect it from the perils of language.

Producing a child which will have power over words seems more plausible than ever gaining this power herself. But perhaps she symbolically "mothers" something greater, just as the biblical Rachel "is thought of as the typical wife of Jacob or Israel and hence as the symbolic mother of Israel (Matthew 2:18)" (Frye 140).

Rachel, like other Laurence heroines, has two voices, giving her something of a "schizophrenic character" (Stovel "Sisters," 122). The voices within her battle for recognition, but rarely do the inner voices make it to the surface. More commonly, they fight internally: "What are you worried about, Rachel? I'm not worried. I'm perfectly all right. Well, relax, then. I am relaxed. Oh? Shut up. Just shut up" (77). Possibly, as Stovel suggests, "Rachel is in dire need of therapy" ("Sisters" 122), or perhaps she gives the only sane response to a society which prefers that women's voices remain in the crypt. Rachel is very unfamiliar with expressing her true self in words. For the most part her voice travels in body language, except for the running commentary with God, which is similar to that of her sister Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers*.

Rachel is an introvert, who fears for her sanity, probably because of the discrepancy between her thoughts and her speech. Like Hagar, her fear of shame is an oppressive factor in her life, which arises from excessive pride. Rachel's body, her physical self, has desires which are unacceptable to her psyche; like the gently expiring Jesus, she expects to show no pain, anger, or physical needs: "Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable? That's worse, much worse" (25). Rachel would rather be insane than silly, which is perhaps, ultimately, the point of the novel–to show that it is only in accepting one's self as a fool, being willing to be seen as one really is, vulnerabilities and all–that any freedom can be attained. This is God's jest. But God is not necessarily depicted as one without his own vulnerabilities. Laurence says in a letter to Ernest Buckler that, in her fiction, "God comes across as a being who is both jester and in pain, one of His own fools, perhaps. It was not lightly that I called one of my novels A JEST OF GOD. . . ." (Wainwright *Soul* 32).

In the Manawaka works it is not only the voices of the protagonists, but also the voices of their children which become progressively stronger. From Rachel's benign tumor to Morag's Pique, there is a huge advancement. The end of *A Jest of God* shows Rachel in control of her life and her mother's as well. She has been empowered by finding even a snippet of voice, and she is aware again–as in the beginning, of the power of song. She focuses, after boarding the bus for the "golden city" of Vancouver, on remembering "the words. . . the words of the songs, the psalms. ***Make me to hear joy and gladness that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoyce*** " (208). It is a happy coincidence that this novel is the one responsible for one of Laurence's first major moves of independence as well: with the funds from the movie rights sold to Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward,[3] she "suddenly had

[3] The movie, titled *Rachel, Rachel,* was released in 1968, directed by Paul Newman and staring Joanne Woodward.

enough money to make a down payment and get a mortgage on Elm Cottage" (*Dance* 181), in which she wrote six books during her highly productive years in England.

In remembering the words and in being able to speak, and, more importantly, *sing* them, Rachel is granted a power, not like the "queen" in the opening lines, but like a "prophetess" –one capable of delivering divine messages: "I will rage . . . like a prophetess. . . . I may sing aloud, even in the dark" (209). She has evolved from the horror of having her voice "dragged" from her in the tabernacle to the point where loud, erratic, undisciplined prophesy is not only acceptable, but something to which she can look forward.

As Rachel struggles to remember the words to "the songs, the psalms" (208), we are reminded that her journey moves through and beyond the words provided by Christian hymns. Like Hagar, she views Christianity with a jaundiced eye, yet, also like Hagar, she is strengthened by songs in her journey. But Rachel, now with "fingers like pencils" (209), has begun to write her own script–at least figuratively (if not literally, which is saved for Vanessa and Morag). She is lured into her past and her future by the "drum-beat" of both religious hymns and secular skipping rhymes, combining the Christian and the pre-Christian paths to power.

Social science affirms that a woman's place in society marks the level of civilization.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (*Last* 280)

But Jesus turned to them and said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children.

Luke 23:28

Chapter 5
The Fire-Dwellers

Stacey is the first of the Manawaka heroines to question and interpret her relationship with God at a conscious level, and to perceive, with awareness, the possibility of other gods–the television, the "trinket charms," and, not least of all, her own subconscious which is revealed as she talks to herself and to God in virtually the same breath. Up to this point, Laurence has presented gods and humans as separate entities (except where someone like Jason Currie–a man with political and economic clout–*acted* like a god); here the two begin to merge in a woman. Stacey becomes aware in the course of the novel of just how much her own role as a mother parallels that of God: she too has created children and become their source of love, guidance, and protection; and she, too, makes mistakes in raising them, sometimes unaware of, and sometimes hesitant to accept, the huge responsibility that goes with the power inherent in mothering. Laurence begins to explore woman as Christ, perhaps in anticipation of the sculpted "Crucified Woman"[1] which is so appealing to her years later.

The first pages of *The Fire-Dwellers* draw attention to the complex and often conflicting relationship between spirituality and materialism. The "Hers and His" books on the respective bedside tables reflect corresponding avenues to empowerment, suitably situated beside the all-important relationship pacifier, the marriage bed: "Two books reside on the bedside table–*The Golden Bough* and *Investments and You*, Hers and His, both unread" (8). *The Golden Bough* (1890), by Sir James Frazer, the "Hers" of the two texts, is a comparative study in folklore, magic, and religion, showing parallel beliefs in primitive and Christian cultures; this is where Stacey feels she might find

[1] Laurence discusses the controversy surrounding "Crucified Woman," by Almuth Lutkenhaus, in the "Forewords" of her Memoir (*Dance* 15-17).

answers to questions that evade her, giving her knowledge and, hence, power. *Investments and You*, the "His" side of the bed, reveals Mac's pursuit of the typical masculine power form: money. Notably, though, neither Stacey nor Mac has mustered the energy to consult her or his respective sources of higher power: the books remain unopened, just as much of their own power throughout the novel remains unharnessed, flailing loosely and often causing harm. Ironically, though, both seem to reap benefits from their respective gods and to attain limited success in the realms of power they each respect: Stacey through magic, folklore and religion; and Mac through financial prosperity and managerial affluence. It is not necessary that they actually read the books; these gendered concepts are so deeply integrated into the society in which Stacey and Mac participate that their influences permeate both their public and private lives.

Mac's new job selling "Richalife" accentuates the parallel between commercialism and religion. From its logo, "Both Spirit and Flesh Altered" (34), to its false-god-manager, Thor Thorlakson, to its mimicking biblical timeline–"B.R. days–before Richalife" (39)–Richalife offers the fervor and vigor of an evangelical movement. Perhaps in this novel, the only one of the Manawaka works that does not include reference to the Tabernacle of the Risen and the Reborn, the evangelical movement is symbolically replaced by Richalife. The dubious "Not Just Vitamins" are offered like a new fetish we might find in Laurence's African works; Richalife becomes, as Christl Verduyn points out, a "pseudo-religion" ("Language" 132). Of course, calling it a "pseudo-religion" inherently implies that there is a "genuine" or "true" religion elsewhere, which is understood in western culture to be Christianity.

Not until late in the novel is Thor Thorlakson revealed to be Vernon Winkler, the tormented "kid crying, mucus pouring from his nose" (243) that grew up in poverty in Stacey's home town of Manawaka, instead of the powerful Norse god his name implies. This false god, whom Stacey, referring to Faust's devil incarnate, sees as a "bat-winged Mephistopheles" (44), selling his false product, does, however, wield substantial power over Mac in the business world; he is precisely the kind of secular god that would be a model in a book like *Investments and You*. Stacey's perceptions of Thor reveal not only her sense of humor and her ability to articulate, but also the influence of Christianity on her sense of good and evil. Her vision of Thor as a "double-dyed snake-in-the-grass" and a "refugee from the discards of Lucifer's army" (100) calls on satanistic biblical imagery.

Even though Stacey's "religious" god is modeled after Christian concepts, she is also deeply influenced by folklore (e.g. Greek mythology, Faustian devils, and the "Ladybird" nursery rhyme), and by what might be called magic, that kind of spiritual power beyond the literal or the explainable, like the power that "would set the house on fire" (257) if she were to tell the truth about her feelings.

One of Stacey's first conversations with God reveals not only her hopes and her fears of what he might be for her, but also shows how she identifies on a personal level with him, and places his own doubts on a level with her own:

At the Day of Judgment, God will say *Stacey MacAindra, what have you*

> *done with your life?* And I'll say, *Well, let's see, Sir, I think I loved my kids*. And He'll say, *Are you certain of that?* And I'll say, *God, I'm not certain about anything any more.* So He'll say, *To hell with you then. We're all positive thinkers up here.* Then again, maybe He wouldn't. Maybe He'd say, *Don't worry, Stacey, I'm not all that certain, either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist.* And I'd say, *I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself.* (14)

The fear that God will require that she must be a "positive thinker" in order to enter heaven would, in essence, mandate that she be a false self, and deny all her doubts and questions about the worth of both God's and her own existence. This replicates what is required of her on earth, where her experience and her observation tell her that truth is not acceptable, especially when it comes to filling in forms, such as she must for Ian's school and Mac's Richalife products. She is expected to act, look, and speak in particular ways, regardless of how she feels. She hopes that God will embrace her insecurities and share some of his own: "*Don't worry, Stacey. I'm not all that certain either*" (14) Interestingly, Laurence uses similar words in a letter to Ernest Buckler in 1974 when discussing an unspecified "crack about God"; she assumes the god role in offering comfort:

> I guess God wouldn't mind so much, tho. If He or It or Whatever exists as a consciousness, He or It would probably just say "Never mind, Ern, often had the same thought myself" or words to that effect. (Wainwright *Soul* 30)

This personal and playful dialogue with God emphasizes Stacey's development beyond Laurence's previous characters in her identification with God. Her easy relationship with the divine also implies a spiritual evolution.

Stacey is in constant conflict over her belief in God. It is as though she hardly dares to hope he might exist as a benevolent force. And indeed, he rarely does for her. Instead of comfort, his voice takes on the tone of the patriarchal society in which she exists, belittling her with pet names and demeaning her intellect: "You are suggesting that if I am expecting justice I am a bird-brain? You have a point there, Lord" (27). The god that Stacey has been given by her church and her society consistently undermines her faith in a higher being that might actually *give* her some power instead of constantly taking it away. The god in her head calls her "bird-brain," "Idiot-child" (120), "doll" (52), "silly" (52), and "a mean old bitch" (27).

This systemic undermining of Stacey's perceptions of truth is inherent not only in the religious structure, but in the secular world as well. When Stacey contemplates Buckle's beliefs, which are perceived in her mind as "pagan," her inner voice ridicules her analytical ability:

> [Buckle's] shrines are invisible. I wonder what they look like, and what fetishes and offerings lurk on those altars? Yeh, doll, that evening course Man and His Gods. Great authority, you. What do you know of it? Don't be silly. (52)

Ironically, the course title, "Man and His Gods," which in a contemporary context might be refuted as sexist, is actually perfectly accurate: within the academic (as well as the biblical) canon, God, and most of those who

represent him are masculine. The centuries of patriarchal interpretation and masculine control of the Christian god, leave Stacey with no apparent alternative: she invokes the god she was given, and, though he is somewhat ornery and abusive, she cannot help calling on him. "God knows why I chat to you, God–it's not that I believe in you" (63). Elaine Showalter offers some explanation of how women's experience is denied through academia:

> Women [students] are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity, in part because they do not see it mirrored and given resonance in literature . . . . They are expected to identify with masculine experience, which is presented as the human one, and have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experiences, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature, or accepted in criticism. (qtd. by Tillie Olsen 82)

A similar argument is taken up by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who says that "current scholarly theory and research are deficient because they neglect women's lives and contributions and construe humanity and human history as male" ("In Search" 33). Fiorenza further specifies how this neglect and one-sided construction are particularly apparent in Christian doctrine, and how she proposes to change things:

> I attempt to reconstruct early Christian history as women's history in order not only to restore women's stories to early Christian history but also to reclaim this history as the history of women and men. ("In Search" 34)

While Stacey does not reconstruct the Christian God, she does go some distance towards putting him on a level playing field with herself.

Stacey's god is pervasive in her life. It appears even to be his concern that she be appropriately thin. God is part of her inner food-police, though she has the wherewithal to at least reprimand him for reprimanding her: "Shut up, God. I feel too lousy not to eat. Bananas tomorrow" (83). Even though Stacey doubts his existence, she is compelled to call upon him and offer deals for his favor because he is the only possible source of power to which she is allowed any access. Her physical power frightens her. After she loses her temper with her sons' squabbling, she "grabbed their shoulders and flung them both to the floor with as much force as she could muster" (19). She calls on God to help her erase her actions: "God, how can I make all this better as if it hadn't happened? No answer. No illumination from on high. As if I expected any" (20). When it comes to her children, she is afraid not to believe, just in case his power is omnipotent. She makes deals with God; she will not complain "about even one single solitary thing" if he will just not "let anything terrible happen to any of them" (72-3). Unlike the Old Testament patriarchs who are willing to sacrifice their children for God's favour–for example, Abraham would cut the throat of his son Isaac (Gen: 22), and Jephthah does kill his daughter, his only child, in order to gain favours in the battlefield (Judges 11:34-39)–Stacey is willing to take any punishment herself in order to spare her children. Yet, after she commits adultery, Stacey cannot "quite believe that Ian is safe and she herself essentially unpunished after all" (212). Her faith is such that she expects retaliation for breaking the rules, just as Nathaniel and Johnnie

do in *This Side Jordan*.

While Stacey's belief in God does not empower her directly, her conversations with him are a way for her to explore her own powers and the similarities between her role as a mother and his as a god. Their talks also serve as trial grounds for her eventual attempts to express herself more honestly with humans, as Colin Nicholson points out:

> The fine and mischievous irony in the narrative fact that the male voice with which Stacey seems on most equitable, though not always comfortable, terms is the one she invents most completely for herself– the voice of God. (x)

She converses and argues with God in a way that she does not with Mac, saying, "Listen here, God, don't talk to me like that" (156), when the inner voice critiques her mothering skills, or (my personal favourite), "Goddamn you, God" (131), when she realizes she is "stuck" with life instead of an easy-out suicide.

Stacey's recognition that things might be different if Christ had been a *parent* places her as a would-be revisionist of basic Christian text, and shows her desire to recreate the image of God in a form more like herself: "So next time you send somebody down here, get It born as a her with seven young or a him with a large family and a rotten boss, eh? Then we'll see how the inspirational bit goes" (156). But, "never convinced totally, one way or another" of whether he exists, she is quick to retract any fault-finding: "God, pay no attention. I'm nuts. I'm not myself" (156).

That the church she has inherited has acted as a forum for oppressing women, and as a silencing force for both sexes seems clear to Stacey, who traces the root of the problem back through biblical reference:

> Does [Mac] hate me? If so, how long? Where did it start? Everything goes too far back to be traced. The roots vanish because they don't end with Matthew . . . . They go back and back forever. Our father Adam . . . . What's the matter with us that we can't talk? . . . How come we feel it's indecent? (155)

When Tess, her perfectly coiffed neighbour, attempts suicide, this sentiment is echoed as Stacey tries to comfort her shocked husband: "Maybe it wasn't you Jake. Everything starts a long time ago" (247).

The magazine article entitled "Mummy Is the Root of all Evil?" (277) further demonstrates the pervasive influence of the Bible on twentieth-century attitudes, with traditional interpretation of Eve as the root of all evil for disobeying God's orders in the garden of Eden. Mummy and Eve are presented as conspicuous parallel characters in this headline, representing the male construction of evil, where, for example, Mac accuses Stacey of "ruin[ing]" Ian because she would let him mourn his young friend's death alone in his room.

It is not only Stacey's mind which falls prisoner to the masculine order, but her perceptions of her body as well, which she sees in the mirror on the opening page of the novel as "less real than real" (7), though she remembers having "breasts like apples as it says in the Song of Solomon" (11), thus referencing even her sexuality to a Bible story. Her girdle, that rubbery

instrument of body restriction, lies on the floor. Stacey imagines "everything would be alright if only I was better educated. I mean, if I were. Or if I were beautiful" (8). Even though she knows consciously that, "at 39, after four kids, you can't expect to look like a sylph," Stacey is haunted throughout the novel by the idea that she must lose ten pounds. The aggression of her inner voice on this matter is clearly out of proportion: "Come on, fat slob, get up off your ass" (8).

We know, however, that Stacey's interpretation of her looks cannot be trusted, as she herself recognizes when she sees an old photo of a time when she "cared about her ugliness" (21): *"My heavens, I was actually pretty–why didn't I know it then?"* (21). Comparing herself to Cleopatra, she examines her body through man's eyes:

> Oh, Cleopatra. You old swayback. . . . The stretch marks look like little silver worms in parallel processions across my belly and thighs. My breasts aren't bad, and at least my ankles aren't thick. Mac said once he liked the color of my eyes, greenish-grey. But there used to be a slight hollow on the side of my buttocks, a little concave place that showed when I wore a tight skirt, and he liked that, too, and it isn't there anymore. Filled in the slow accumulation of flesh. Not flesh. Fat. F.A.T. (21)

What she perceives as the deterioration of her body, then, is important only as it fails to meet the feminine ideal as defined by the masculine gaze. This ideal has become so internalized that it need not even be verbalized by a man; for example, there is no indication that Mac finds Stacey physically unattractive or "fat." It is, however, important to him (as it is to Morag's husband in *The Diviners*) that Stacey uphold the conventional representation of woman–especially woman as wife–in her outward appearance. This is emphasized in the requirement of falsified hair. Stacey is constantly going to the hair-dresser: it is one of her weekly rituals and a major concern if she is to appear in public, particularly at one of the several cocktail parties held by Thor, where her singular role is as supportive wife. Stacey's hairdressing experience is presented as a combination of religious, pagan and science fiction ritual:

> [Stacey] leans back her head to receive the benediction of the shampoo. The priestess's plastic-sheathed hands administer to her scalp, the fingers updrawn like talonless claws. . . . a young woman laughs soundlessly up at her priestess. . . . An ammonia whiff and a conglomeration of humid perfumes come to Stacey's nostrils. (93)

Here Stacey is launched, as though drugged by the potions, into a science fiction sexual fantasy on another planet where a "butterfly priestess" completes a transformation for her alien lover (93-4). The process reminds her of her fear of "having an anesthetic or undergoing hypnosis" (94), obviously connecting the experience with loss of control.[2]

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[2] Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication on the Rights of Women* (1792), comments on how women's aspirations for beauty serve to enslave her: "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (44).

Stacey's struggles with the status quo of beauty–to be thin, to have perfect hair–show her awareness that loss of control over her physical self leaves her disempowered emotionally and spiritually. Rather than attempt to further separate the body and the spirit,[3] however, she longs for their reunion, as is evident from the sense of integrity and fulfillment that accompany her memories of dancing.

While the roles of mother and wife conspicuously place Stacey as a servant to the masculine order, she finds some sisterhood with her female neighbours, Tess Folger and Bertha Garvey. With these two women as foils, Stacey's life appears almost sane. Bertha and Tess take on something of a mad-woman-in-the-attic status. When introduced, they appear to be perfect constructions, but, as their own demons are revealed, we realize that Tess is quite "mad," eventually attempting suicide, and Bertha is deeply oppressed and depressed. Tess, even in her housecoat, " being tall and slender looks as though ready to receive the Peruvian ambassador" (9). Stacey usually feels even dumpier and fatter in the presence of this classic bourgeois, materially consumptive housewife. But Tess's soul is fed little better than her body: she "lives on pineapple and cottage cheese salads" (78). While there are indications that Tess's life is lonely and isolated, she does not confide her weaknesses to her husband: "He doesn't like people not feeling well" (91). When Stacey realizes that "Aunt Tess," while baby-sitting, has been forcing two-year-old Jen to watch her pet fish cannibalize each other, she knows something is amiss. And while Stacey's first response is anger and guilt, she does try to reach out to Tess: "Are you okay? Are you feeling all right? I mean, there's nothing worrying you?" But Tess is unable to relate on any emotional terms–she can only think the questions refer to her physical self: "Do you think I don't look all right?" (201). Society in general and her doctor in particular tell her to suppress whatever does not fit the picture of happiness: "everything's fine. The doctor . . . [has] given me these new tranquilizers" (202). The socially acceptable way for women to deal with emotional or intellectual discomfort was to numb it. The reality of female existence must be erased, just as the name of Hetshepsut, ironically the brand name of one of Tess's cosmetics, was "chiseled off all the monuments after she died" (172). As Keith Louise Fulton points out, such histories might be different if women had a different place in the power structure:

> What a difference to Tess and to Stacey to have known about women's lives, not through cosmetics, male scholarship and vindictive husbands, but through voices spoken and interpreted by free women. ("Feminism" 115)

All the naming and un-naming of which Stacey is aware, have been in the hands of men.

Yet, ironically, when she daydreams of taking flight at Tess's Polyglam party, it is through the "arms" of men with, I think, no intentional play on the word *arms* as weapons: "Stacey writes *Safe in the Arms of Jesus*. Then she writes *Lost in the Arms of Morpheus* . . ." (81), instead of the "Tropical

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[3] Susan Bordo discusses how Plato, Augustine and Descartes see the body as "the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control" (145).

Paradise" dessert recipe being recited by the Polyglam lady, there to sell them plastic *containers*. Both of the titles Stacey writes imply a desire to escape: first by being rescued by the Christian god, and cradled in his arms as a child might be, then by getting lost in sleep, in the arms of the God of Dreams in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These are her preferred paradises. Even though Stacey recognizes the shallowness in the behavior of herself and her female neighbours at the Polyglam party, she does not see them as "complacent," but rather "scared" (83).[4]

The power of others over Stacey is not just emotional and spiritual: Stacey's body comes under attack not only at her own hands, but also in her sexual relationships, which further frustrate her attempts at intimacy. If one subscribes to Camille Paglia's viewpoint, the power of a woman's sexuality is virtually immeasurable (ix). We know from Stacey's conversation with Rachel in *A Jest of God* that she considers sex a sustaining factor in her life: "another three weeks and I'd be up the walls. . . it's just missing Mac. . . I mean, in bed" (*Jest* 27). However, when one is presented with the details of her sex life, it is hard to imagine what she misses. Instead of contributing to her sense of self-worth and personal power, not to mention pleasure, sex with Mac is blatantly abusive: "When he is inside her, he puts his hands on her neck, as he sometimes does unpredictably. He presses down on her collarbone" (30). When she resists, and says, "It hurts," he defies her: "It can't. Not even this much. Say it doesn't hurt" (30). That Mac must hurt her physically, then force her to deny it during sex–the definitive union between a husband and wife–is indicative of the ultimate control he requires, not only over her body but over her voice as well. As Fulton points out, "from the choking hands of her husband . . . . She must participate in the false naming of reality" (111). Stacey's survival depends on her cooperation in her own oppression, and on her constantly disguising her own voice, and proclaiming the worth and authority of the other. And Stacey, instead of being angry after "He comes. . . and goes to sleep" (30), lies awake talking to "God, Sir," and explaining how it is probably her fault: "I've aged this man. I've foisted my kids upon him. I yak away at him. . ." (30). Instead of recognizing Mac's need to have power over her, she imagines, by some leap of reason common to abused women, that his violence is a result of her power over him. Perhaps the only way to maintain any sense of control is to create a scenario where she is the cause–the subject rather than the object, the abuser rather than the victim. This, combined with some sense that she deserves to be punished, must affect her compliance. Certainly society provided no sanctuary for such women: it was perfectly legal for a man to rape his wife in Canada until 1983, more than 20 years after the publication of *The Fire-Dwellers*. Stacey's sex life seems to fit perfectly what Luce Irigaray says about the woman whose "pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man" (25).

Stacey's sexual encounter with Buckle Fennick is another example of the male desire to achieve sexual gratification through humiliation of another,

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[4] This reminds me of Mary Wollstonecraft's reference to women who smile "under the lash at which [they] dare not snarl" (*Vindication* 33).

though Buckle does not actually touch Stacey physically. Instead, he masturbates in front of her, refusing her hands: "don't touch me. . . you're not getting it see" (147). Buckle's need for total control is almost funny; he hogs his penis, afraid perhaps that he will lose something of himself in giving another pleasure. To further humiliate Stacey, Buckle throws two coins at her as she "turns for the door": "There's your bus fare, lady" (147). She is no longer "Stacey," but now a female non-personal construction of "lady." Her "fear like tides" requires that she "pick up the silver" because she has no money and no way home, giving an air of prostitution to the whole scene, although she does not even have the control that such a woman would have. Val, for instance, the Métis prostitute from Manawaka, is the one who finally "debunk[s] Thor Thorlakson, the phony god of thunder" (Stovel *Stacey's Choice* 55), thus freeing both Mac and Stacey from his rule. That Buckle's now obese and blind mother, who was once a prostitute, is in the same apartment adds to the hostility of Buckle's actions. And any pleasure Stacey might have garnered from feeling potency in her sexuality is undermined. As Susan Swan puts it: "Unfortunately, for centuries, women's need to inspire desire has been literally and punitively interpreted as 'asking for it'" (2( ).

While Stacey's affair with Luke is, by comparison, a respite of kindness and delight, even Luke is egotistical and self-centered in his immediate response after their first sexual tryst: "You really loved it, didn't you? You wanted it for a long time, didn't you?" (187). Part of his satisfaction comes from knowing, being told, that she really wanted "it"–*it* being sex, the penis, just as Freud and Buckle would have it. However, his gratification, like Mac's, depends on her lying: she answers, "Yes," but says to herself, "but that's not true either" (187). And while Stacey feels some sense of empowerment on her drive home, thinking, "He wanted me. He wanted *me*" (189), the same thought cluster is peppered with patriarchal judgment: "Bitch," "whore" (189). She is not flattered to think that he would want only her sexual organs, but rather to think that he wanted her whole person, her "me," or core self.[5] Susan Swan discusses the concept of female power and desirability in her essay "Desire and the Mythology of Femininity," saying that in her rape fantasy, "the man overwhelms me–not because I'm worthless and need to be subjugated but because I am so sexy I have made him lose control" (261). This perception is similar to that held by the narrator of Atwood's "Rape Fantasy." The woman's pleasure, then, comes largely from her own perception of herself as an object of desire, and, thus, one with the power to make men lose control.

Stacey does want power, as is further demonstrated in her fantasy of herself as a god-figure who, outside the confines of marriage, could form a union with Luke and re-create the world: "I'd like to go to bed with you for seven days and seven unbroken nights. I'd like to start again, everything, all of life . . . " (189). This echoes the Genesis version of how the Christian god created earth: "And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because

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[5] It is worth noting that the words of judgment she uses depict a female dog, an animal that goes into heat (i.e. has powerful sexual desires) and a prostitute, one who utilizes her sexuality to make money. Equivalent terms applied to a man, "stud," or "gigolo," for example, do not carry nearly the negative weight and, in fact, may be seen as positive attributes.

that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made" (Gen. 2:3). Interestingly, Luke's science fiction creation of a new world seems to reflect Stacey's existing one: "[The greyfolk] lost their language and all knowledge of their past, although they had a few dim racial memories and some bizarre quasi-religious cults" (184).

Stacey dreams of a different world in another case as well, one where "the hillside is burning" (30). In the dream she is able to take only one child across the "tree bridge. . . .away from the crackling smoke, back to the green world" (31), all the while thinking that she was probably responsible for the fire in the first place by dropping a lighted cigarette. The element of fire, which is, not suprisingly, pervasive in the novel, is no friend to Stacey, yet she must dwell in it constantly through her marriage and as part of the biblical script for her life: "Better to marry than burn, St. Paul said, but he didn't say what to do if you married *and* burned" (193). Paul's implication is that those who have sexual desire and do not marry, go to hell; however, Stacey's experience tells her that maybe marriage *is* hell. This truth about the nature of marriage, and its resultant emotional, and often physical, pain, is one that Stacey can never articulate wholly, recognizing that the truth "would set the house on fire" (257). The destruction of the house upon telling the truth could refer simply to the disintegration of her marriage if Mac were to know the truth of her affair; however, it goes much deeper on a metaphorical level, referring perhaps to the possibility of going to hell if she exposes the reality of her marriage.

George Woodcock, in his "Human Elements" article, talks about "the inferno of unsatisfied urges in Stacey herself, the fires of a sanguine and insatiable temperament" (56), which seem to place her as a sex-maniac, echoing the 1486 *Malleus Maleficarum* perception of women as lusting and "insatiable" (MacHaffie *Readings* 56). While Woodcock seems to be praising Laurence's good work in her depiction of Stacey, his own prejudices of woman's proper place seep through his words: "Stacey, like fire, is more mutable [than Hagar], able to shift from the blaze of self-destructive passion to the glow of love and loyalty" (58-59). His suggestion that the "passion" inherent in her affair with Luke is "self-destructive" is hard to swallow. Her affair with Luke seems to be much saner and safer physically than her sexual liaisons with her husband, who tries to choke her and threatens to break her collar bone if she does not say what he wants. Perhaps Woodcock confuses the "glow of love and loyalty" with the glow of surreptitiously guzzled alcohol which Stacey is constantly leaning on in order to maintain the status quo of marital expectations in her role as wife and mother. Woodcock's comments tell more about his own vision than about Laurence's. Luke has a stabilizing effect: his role reflects that of the good physician, not unlike Jesus or Saint Luke of the gospels.[6]

Luke Venturi acts like a Jesus figure in several ways. Conspicuously named after the author of the third book of the New Testament, he is more of a true prophet than Matthew MacAindra, named after the first book, but unable

[6] Saint Luke was a companion of Saint Paul and author of the third Gospel of the New Testament. He is considered the patron saint of painters and physicians.

to "minister" truly. Matthew embodies one of Stacey's biggest fears: that God, or, in this case, God's representative (i.e. the father, the minister), will become "dependent" (63) on her. And, of course, he does. Luke, however, is the real prophet. His first words to Stacey imply his knowledge of where she is emotionally, and it is a "hell" he can deliver her from: "Hi. Do you mind me asking what in hell you are doing there?" (161). He is smaller than Mac, with long uncombed hair and an unshaven face, and he wears an "Indian" sweater with "motifs of outspread eagle wings and bear masks" (162). His interest in "totems" (208) places him among those who identify with animals as tribal kinsman. In the A-frame cottage–a style which conspicuously replicates most western churches–he becomes a kind of everyman: the Indian sweater, the Arabic rug, the European mother who was blessed by the Pope. He wipes her tears, hears her "confessional" (166) and comforts her with words and with his body. He creates new worlds and new races with new languages in his science fiction. Her shyness in presenting her body to him because she "is not perfect enough" (186) rings of religious worship. And he , like Jesus in the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), rejects her strict adherence to her female role by encouraging her to come away with him. But he intuitively knows her mind, having the gift of the "second sight" (210), which allows him to see that she will terminate their affair. That Stacey cannot help seeing herself as his mother places her as a Mary figure in more than one sense. As well as being the same age as his mother, she also has had similar visions to her. Luke tells of the Pope's influence causing his mother to see "hosts of angels swooping around like so many pigeons" (180), just as Stacey sees the seagulls as prophets in Vancouver, their "angelic presence and voices like gravel out of a grave" (13). His vision ties in with the bird motif that appears in all of Laurence's works.

The "crazy rhyme" that introduces *The Fire-Dwellers* is, as in *A Jest of God*, is a child's:

> *Ladybird, ladybird*
> *fly away home;*
> *Your house is on fire,*
> *Your children are gone.* (7)

Stacey's first thoughts reveal her consciousness of the tenacity of the words: "Crazy rhyme. Got it on the brain this morning. That's from trying to teach Jen a few human words yesterday" (7). That Stacey specifies it is ***human*** words she is trying to teach her daughter could be seen as an implication that becoming human depends on becoming indoctrinated into speech–entering the symbolic order, as Jacques Lacan would have it. Stacey, of course, is already deeply indoctrinated. Jen, however, is still in the place of prelinguistic signifying processes centered on the mother, before being squelched, or repressed, as she enters the male symbolic order of words, a theory expanded upon by Julia Kristeva. Stacey's recollection of the rhyme also shows her inclination to go back herself into a simpler time, but, as Laurence points out in an interview with Michel Fabre, "her humor enables her to partly free herself of the illusion, as she grows into a middle-aged woman, that she was more innocent when she was a child" (194).

That Jen will only "mumble mumble squawk" and is "determined not to communicate" (9) indicates the reluctance of the female to enter into the symbolic order of language where the voice fails to communicate anything useful or positive, especially for females. When, near the end of the novel, we hear Jen's first words constructing two complete sentences, we also see where she has accepted her place in the patriarchal order: "Hi, Mum. Want tea?" (272). When Jen repeats twice more, "Want tea, Mum?" Stacey wonders, "Ye gods. What if she never learns to say anything else?" (273). Jen's first words construe her as recognizing the familial order–she knows who Mum is and recognizes her role as a servant and nurturer, and is finally willing to take up her place in that order immediately after Stacey realizes she will never "speak the unspeakable" (272) to Matthew. Mac's aging minister father is a perfect representative of the patriarchal order structured around the masculine god.

It is not only Jen, however, who seems "determined not to communicate" (9). Mac "refuses" to talk to Stacey about his work and makes specific requests to Stacey not to utilize her verbal skills when meeting his new boss: "Whatever else you do, Stacey, for God's sake don't get into an argument, will you?" (38). The one thing Mac is afraid he cannot control is her speech, and it alone can cause him the greatest grief. This points to the potency that is associated with words and voices. And because Stacey is obviously quite witty with words, this request is particularly stifling. She clearly has problems reconciling the conflict between being smart and being nice. Something "girls of the fifties" had to learn, according to Erica Ritter, was "that if you're going to be a smartass, you must also struggle to prove that you are nice. . . . velvet gloves were invented to conceal mailed fists" (221). Stacey is constantly aware of the discrepancy between what is said and what is thought. She takes Thor to task over the ridiculous Richalife questionnaires, saying, "Who's gonna tell you anything on a thing like that?" (101). She fills in Duncan's form from school with what she perceives as "true" answers, angering both her son and her husband:

> Name, address and phone of person who could be contacted in National Emergency if parents not available. To the final question, Stacey had written: *Name*: God. *Address*: Heaven. Ian, stark-faced with fury, had stormed to Mac. (62)

Obviously, Stacey's religious beliefs are strong, regardless of her playful banter with God. To Ian and Mac it is more important to be traditional, not to ruffle the status quo, than to be creative or honest. With her female friends, it is the same:

> Come on, Stacey, let me freshen your drink. That's what Tess says. Yes, she does . . . . Freshen, indeed. Let me give you another slug of this drug–she doesn't say that. (47)

This sense that there is no integration of words and thoughts is disturbing to Stacey: "I'm surrounded by voices all the time but none of them seem to be saying anything, including mine. This gives me the feeling that we may all be one-dimensional" (77). It is as though she is beginning to blend into the magazine headlines and TV screen flat dimensions. But "The Ever-Open Eye" (57), the TV, seems like a subversion of the Christian god, who also sees all. If

there is an intended parallel here between God's vision and the TV screen, then it is worth noting that Laurence has carefully selected disastrous scenarios for broadcast:

> EIGHT-THIRTY NEWS BOMBERS LAST NIGHT CLAIMED A DECISIVE VICTORY FOUR VILLAGES TOTALLY DESTROYED AND A NUMBER OF OTHERS SET ABLAZE (89)

or

> EVER-OPEN EYE STREETS IN CITIES NOT SO FAR AWAY ARE BURNING BURNING IN RAGE AND SORROW SET ABLAZE BY THE CHILDREN OF SAMSON AGONISTES VOICE: RIOTS ARE SAID TO BE WELL UNDER CONTROL IN (278)

The element of fire in these broadcasts, and the loss of control depicted, show how the TV, instead of being the great communicator it was promised to be, has the opposite effect: it bombards with catastrophe, spreading hell and damnation and is incapable of *receiving* communication from the audience–not unlike the church.

The problem with words, then, is not so much the production of them, but the receiving of them–having those who speak also cultivate the ability to listen seems impossible. Mac will do neither: "Stacey, there is absolutely no use in talking" (104-5). Yet when she carries on the constant conversations in her head she feels "schizophrenic" to the point where she envies Catholics because they at least have somebody who listens (106). At the same time, she fears the power of words:

> Mac scares me when he's like he was this morning. Why can't he ever say? Maybe if he ever did, he'd throttle me. I wouldn't blame him. My God, maybe he *will* throttle me one of these days. "Salesman Strangles Wife"–it could happen to anybody. (106)

That she is beginning to see everything in headline form says something about the influence of the media on her life, and that violence is becoming an almost expected result of any aberration from routine–being strangled by your husband "could happen to anybody." Stacey, like Laurence's other narrators, is "troubled by the ambiguous relations between . . . words and power" (Brydon 184).

Katie recognizes the communication breakdown between Stacey and Mac, and claims she will not let it happen to her: "You and Dad yakking away at each other. *Whatsmatter? Nothing's the matter. No need to talk to me in that tone of voice.* Man, not for me" (112). Katie believes she will not be deceived by the myths about marriage, like being rescued and living happily-ever-after. But she is given no clear example of a life for women otherwise. She requires the "new plot" that Virginia Woolf talks about, and especially one on marriage (89), as Carolyn Heilbrun discusses in *Writing a Woman's Life*.

The Fire-Dwellers is the darkest of Laurence's novels. While the brilliant structural technique offers new communicative devices, incorporating interior (truth) and exterior (lies) dialogue, mass media and dreams–all without a single quotation mark–the content itself repeats the old structures of entrapment for women. Even though she perceives some of the magic

qualities of words, they become little more than fetishes in emergency situations, such as when Duncan almost drowns:

> *Duncan! You've got to be all right*
> The words have been screamed . . . she is suddenly aware of the words' total lie. They are rune words, trinket charms to ward off the evil eye, and that is all. (267)

In the end Stacey "feels the city receding" (281), just as she does in the beginning when her conversations with Mac were empty and futile, "as though everything is receding" (76). This is not a success story, then, but it may be another survival story, giving an all-too-clear message about what is required for a marriage to endure. The final image on the television, "the ever open eye," is the "burning burning in rage and sorrow" where the voice announces, "Riots are said to be well under control . . ." (278). This seems reflective of Stacey's predicament: burning with unrealized desires, dwelling in the fire, and well under the control of all the insistent male voices that surround her. All the men who hold power of various sorts–Buckle Fennick, Matthew, Thor, Mac–all speak a language that does not encompass Stacey–except perhaps in the sense that it suffocates her. She recognizes this when Mac gives his subtle praise to their son Ian for his efforts in rescuing Duncan from drowning: "Ian gets the message. It's his language, too. I wish it were mine" (270). If, as Jacques Lacan suggests, the unconscious is structured like language (*Écrits* 147), then being forced to use an unfamiliar language could seriously affect one's unconscious. She is stuck in the black and white language passed down through the patriarchy which she knows is not hers and which leaves her unable to speak in the "full Technicolor" (270) of her perception. Unlike Danso in "The Merchant of Heaven," who could bring new colors to his canvas, she is unable to develop a new language which would give her the ultimate power. Even though Jen finally breaks out of the "babel," the language she comes into is still insufficient. She is still suffering from the Babylonian curse making communication impossible.

Stacey, like the "Merwoman" Luke dubs her, follows the story of "The Little Mermaid," who trades what is natural and good in her (i.e. her dancing) for a life where speech is painful and insufficient with a man who would be her rescuer. Luke astutely differentiates the maid from the woman. Barbara G. Walker says that "the mermaid descended from very old traditions connecting Goddess figures with the sea as a universal womb" (263), which certainly suits the fertile Stacey. The half-woman, half-fish image places Stacey as a Christ-like being as well, since the sign of the fish, simply made with two crescent moon shapes, was claimed by early Christians as a sign for Christ, but was, by most accounts, copied from the earlier pagans, like many other Christian symbols (Walker 374). The fish imagery earlier in the novel, where Tess forces Jen to watch the fish cannibalize each other, makes for an interesting image of the one tradition swallowing up the other.

Finally, Stacey fantasizes about taking up a position of power in much the same way that Rachel dreams of becoming a "priestess." But Stacey's vision reveals her still deep-seated belief that such powers can be granted only through religious channels: "Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may

mutate into a matriarch" (281). She seems unaware that she already is a matriarch in many senses–that most of the male characters, including God, would fall apart without her, though she hints at the possibility in one of her inner dialogues, where she tries to figure out whether she does or does not believe in the God who "echoes in [her] head":

> It's somebody to talk to. Is that all? I don't know. How would I like to be only an echo in somebody's head? Sorry, God. But then you're not dependent upon me, or let's hope not. (63)

She parallels herself to God here, empathizing with his position as an invisible power, an echo whose existence and power to have influence depend upon being consciously acknowledged.

Stacey realizes near the end of the novel that her dreams of being god, of god as a mother, are not going to manifest themselves in her lifetime:

> I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light some day, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it for life. Hell of a revelation that turned out to be. (272)

She has been able to imagine herself as god, to speak with him as an equal and to identify with his problems, but does not have the power in her body or her language to recreate her history and pass on a new icon to her children. Her fear of death is not assuaged by her god: "that grace isn't given. My last breath will be a rattle of panic. . ." (280), with "grace" existing outside herself, bestowed by some higher order over which she has no control. Strangly, this does not seem to leave her, or the reader, feeling that she is entirely disempowered.

Stacey makes some kind of peace with god through her ability to identify with him. Vanessa MacLeod, the narrator and protagonist of *A Bird in the House*, finds herself in a different situation all together. Instead of being the mother, she is the child, and must sort through the various interpretations of god presented to her both formally (in the church) and informally (in the home) in order to harmonize the powers within her reach, if not totally within her control.

. . . the writer has a round-trip ticket. The writer comes back. Do you see? And this information–the information that everyone doesn't have to perish down there is marvelous.

Timothy Findley (*Inside* 181)

The bears were a race of beings less perfect than our fathers. They used to talk, walk upright, and use their paws like hands. When they wanted wives, they were accustomed to steal the daughters of our people.

Yak Quahu (419)

Chapter 6
A Bird in the House

In her essay, "A Place to Stand On," Laurence says that *A Bird in the House* is largely based on her childhood, and is "the only semi-autobiographical fiction I have ever written" (16). While this collection of short stories, using what Clara Thomas calls "a technique of double exposure" ("Short" 28), is sometimes confused with being a novel as well as an autobiography, it is actually closer to the genre of Joyce's *Dubliners*, as Kent Thompson points out in an early review of the collection that he calls a "whole-book" (154). This is unlike her other collection of short stories, the African-set *Tomorrow-Tamer*, in which the stories rarely connect to each other explicitly. Thompson perceives one of the main themes of the *Bird in the House* collection as being Vanessa's education in "various religions," from Grandmother MacLeod's "arbitrary rules of convention" to Grandfather Connor's "Judaic, patriarchal angry God-the-Father self-righteous anger" (154). However, Thompson's suggestion that Vanessa totally rejects the faith of Noreen, the baby-sitter "sorceress" who conceives of a "flashy heaven" (*Bird* 101), unlike the staid and dour United or Baptist possibilities, seems unfounded. I believe Noreen has a profound effect on Vanessa's perceptions of the power of faith, and that Vanessa's role as the narrator of these stories, as a creator with a voice, is an important step in the progressive representation of women as powerful authors of their own histories. Vanessa's responses to the personal, mystical, and religious powers of her childhood undoubtedly shaped her capacity to become an author. I will examine Vanessa's presentation of her religious influences and consider whether she accepts or rejects the power structures inherent in these models, focusing particularly on he strength of Noreen as a female deity. I will go on to show how the stories, especially those which focus on animal imagery, reflect the position of a story-teller who is not

comfortable in the conventionally civilized world, but, rather, identifies with untamed wild creatures–or with those who have, much to their detriment, had their wild spirits tampered with by humans.

The collection's title is taken from Noreen's remark that "A bird in the house means a death in the house" (98), placing her as a central figure in the book, even though she appears only in the title story. Noreen is unlike any other Laurence character, except perhaps some of the priestesses in the African works. The title is based on a folk story, a superstition, rather than the biblical allusions so readily apparent in *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, or *The Fire-Dwellers*. As in all the other Manawaka fiction, Laurence presents the death of the father–which must be perceived in both religious and secular terms–as a frightening but seemingly necessary pre-condition for the spiritual and/or creative evolution of the female heroine.

As a child and a budding writer, Vanessa (like Laurence) finds the Bible most useful as a source for "themes of love and death" and reads it "in the same way [she] read[s] Eaton's Catalogue or the collected works of Rudyard Kipling" (65). As tools of comparison, these specific choices are significant. Eaton's Catalogue is a conspicuous symbol of consumerism–she "bought" the Bible, incorporated it into her imagination, in the same way others bought attractive material items, such as hats and gloves, and made them part of their outward attire. To read the Bible in the same way as she reads the catalogue and Kipling suggests that it is a source of dreamed-about gifts and exotic adventure. The biblical gifts would be gifts of power *and* of materialism: not just a shiny new bicycle, but perhaps a whole kingdom or the ability to heal the sick, or part the sea. While Laurence admits that Kipling's *Kim* was one of her "best-loved" books ("Books" 239) as a child, we know from her comments to Robert Kroetsch that she felt Kipling's work presented an alien landscape and thoughtscape to a Canadian child's psyche: "What the hell did Kipling have to do with where I was living?" (54). That Vanessa does not discriminate in her reading, but makes her sources suit her purpose of story creation, shows the extent to which she is "revising as well as recording her own experience" (Nicholson xi).

From the opening paragraph of the first story, we see (as in *The Stone Angel*) materialism in monolithic proportions: Grandfather Connor's Brick House, "part dwelling place and part massive monument" (11), is a physical object representing wealth, just as the angel marking Jason Currie's wife's grave is "the largest and certainly the costliest" (*Stone* 3). More importantly, we are introduced to the image of the brick house as a symbol of fortification: "sparsely windowed as some crusader's embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness, its rooms in a perpetual gloom except in the brief height of summer" (11). The theme of battle is reinforced throughout the collection, concluding in the story "Jericho's Brick Battlements," which leaves no doubt as to the Old Testament reference.

Jericho, an ancient Palestinian city settled around 8,000 BC, has been the site of many battles and more than one eradication. Joshua tells in the Old Testament how he took the city of Jericho for the Israelites under the guidance of God: The troops were to march around the city for seven days, *without*

speaking a word, while following seven priests, who would blow their trumpets once a day until the seventh day, when: "the priests blew the trumpets . . . and the people *shouted with a great shout* [and] . . . the wall fell down flat" (Joshua 6:20, italics mine). Vanessa, like the troops, performs both rituals–first walking around the house for years in a kind of silence, then shouting the walls down with her words–both written and spoken.

As well as referencing some of the Old Testament stories, Laurence's collection is *structured* much like the Old Testament as well, with its many interrelated stories told independently so that each may stand alone, but may also be used to shed light on each other.

Laurence shows us not only how the semi-autobiographical Vanessa and her female allies (mother and aunt) try to mimic biblical action in attempts to gain power over their lives, but also how, in the end, they reject the kind of patriarchal absolutes that would allow their power to parallel Joshua's ultimate and fatal authority. Under Joshua's command, once the walls are down, the army moves in for the kill: "they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 6:21).

Like the Israelite troops 3,000 years before, Vanessa silently circles the brick house, inside and out. She peeks down from the ceiling grate, hovers in the pantry, and secretly inhabits the garage: she is a "professional listener" (11), always observing and regularly imagining battles of her own where she creates the heroine. Her re-writings of Bible stories pose dramatic love affairs in exotic settings:

> The heroine in my story (which took place in ancient Egypt–my ignorance of this era did not trouble me) was very like the woman in The Song of Solomon . . . . the death scenes had an undeniable appeal, a sombre splendour, with (as it said in Ecclesiastes) the mourners going about the streets and all the daughters of music brought low. (66)

The Song of Solomon (the 22nd book of the Old Testament) is a collection of love poems, generally considered an allegory or parable of God's love for Israel. Alice Laffey points out how the Song reverses traditional patriarchal bias about women:

> The woman is not here portrayed as subservient to the man; in fact, she is portrayed neither as wife nor mother, and therefore outside the traditional hierarchical relationship presupposed by patriarchal marriage. . . . She is not viewed as a sexual object, . . . but rather as an attractive sexual person. Her physical attributes are a source of his celebration, . . . no more or no less than his physical attributes are a source of her delight. (203)

That Vanessa is drawn to this particular song shows her instinct to break with conventional male-dominated relationships. Her attraction to Ecclesiastes may be because of its "emphasis on reason rather than faith" (Laffey 183), and its message that "since there is no life after death, ultimately the fate of the good is the same as the fate of the evil" (Laffey 184). This would be an appealing thought to one who is as of yet unsure of her position in the world as one who is good or one who is evil, as is the case with many children. It also shows

that Vanessa naturally gravitates towards ideals of equality.

The placement of women as protagonists when using the Bible for source material goes some distance to demonstrate the power of Vanessa's imagination. The stories that Vanessa writes as a child seem in some ways precursors to what is further explored in *The Diviners*–the female child literally re-writing history, granting herself a position of power such as is never witnessed for women in her reality. But whether it is "Old Jebb" she talks about, "sick to death in the freezing log cabin, with only the beautiful halfbreed lady (no, woman) to look after him" (23), or love scenes inspired by the *Song of Solomon*, Brian Johnson argues that the writing Vanessa produces as a child "articulates her desire for the near magus-like power that is not so different from the biblical authority she ostensibly transforms" (116). While Johnson rightly points out that "Vanessa's Romantic fictions articulate a form of silent, hidden rebellion that is deeply rooted in a fantasy of power" (113), I disagree that her power fantasies simply replicate the ones she observes or reads about in the Bible. Johnson himself points out, regarding her clothespin dolls, that she "has no interest in playing with the dolls, only in creating them" (116), which is highly unlike either Grandfather Connor or the Old Testament god, both of whom show more interest in pulling the strings of their existing creations than in creating new things.

In the Manawaka brick house, it is Grandfather Connor who "has the privilege of free speech. The women can only speak covertly" (Brydon 193). When Vanessa does speak up, as a teenager in defense of her new beau, it is with unmistakable biblical guidance in an effort to break through her grandfather's "walls": "Our anger met and clashed silently. Then I shouted at him, as though if I sounded all my trumpets loudly enough, his walls would quake and crumble" (184). Grandfather Connor, however, godlike in his power over the household, does not buckle under Vanessa's attempt; in fact, it turns out that he is quite right in his accusation that her boyfriend is married. For Vanessa, shouting does not provide the desired effect; her use of conventional male power is unsuccessful.

Perhaps one of the reasons Vanessa, her mother, aunt, and grandmother spend so many years without ever sounding their trumpets is that they fear Grandfather's complete destruction at their hands, rather than fearing his reprisals. Indeed, if the biblical metaphor were followed, then Grandfather would, after having his walls knocked down, have to be "utterly destroyed" (Joshua 6:21). While it appears that this is what Vanessa sometimes wants, the female faction (generally) of the household is uncomfortable with such an absolute, so they permit the old man's abrasive behavior. In fact, they prefer oppression to chaos, as is evident in Edna's words to Beth:

> I guess I've got used to being back here in the old dungeon. . . . Father's impossible, and certainly no one has said it oftener than I have. . . . But, he's–well, I guess it's just that I have the feeling that the *absolute* worst wouldn't happen here, ever. Things wouldn't actually fall apart. (173)

The echoing of Achebe's title, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where the Ibo tribe disintegrates when it is infiltrated by outsiders, seems to indicate an awareness of complicity in upholding the status quo. That the phrase (*Things Fall Apart*)

originates in a poem by W.B. Yeats titled "The Second Coming" emphasizes the religious connotations. Perhaps, in choosing oppression rather than chaos, the female members of the family are averting the Second Coming, which they have no reason to believe will liberate them.

Vanessa is clearly familiar with the Old Testament protocol, for she "had read large portions of the Bible," generally lines "of a warlike nature" (14). But while she is conscious of the warfare going on around her, she makes a decision not to engage in the traditional destructive powers presented in the Old Testament and practiced by her Grandfather. One could argue that she does not engage in this particular battle because she knows she will lose; that she backs off because she, like her mother and aunt, is oppressed and terrified by the old man. As the French mystic Simone Weil put it: "Oppression that is clearly inexorable and invincible does not give rise to revolt but to submission." However, I believe Vanessa's reticence occurs because she recognizes that there is little true freedom in the "power-over" structure that she has witnessed both in real life and in her readings, and chooses instead to walk away. Like her cousin Chris, she wants an "alternative" from the "God who is so brutal" (140).

We see some evidence of women's reluctance to storm the old man when we look at the one time he actually does become vulnerable, without "the mask of the bear"; that is, when his angelic wife dies. That day "he wore no coat at all . . . although the day was fifteen below zero" (79). He embraces Vanessa, "sob[s] against the cold skin of [her] face" (79) and tells her that her Grandmother "was an angel" (83). That Grandfather Connor exposes a softness towards Grandmother in her death that he never did when she was alive angers Aunt Edna. But out of deference for his grief, she does not confront him, does not rush in for "the kill" when he is down–quite literally "down," for he retires to the basement, his "solitary place" (86), in his sorrow.

Grandfather Connor's close affiliation with the furnace, which he "would stoke up high" (174), and the basement places him in a devilish role as one who prefers, and attempts to master, the underworld. He regularly sits "in the rocking chair beside the furnace, making occasional black pronouncements like a subterranean oracle" (134). The "screee-scraaaw" of the chair becomes his voice of disapproval for the actions of those residing above. The idea that Edna would go with her suitor to Winnipeg, as though it were "Sodom and Gomorrah"[1] (174), seems to be the spark that causes Grandfather Connor to overstoke the furnace:

> In my grandfather's room the pipe was a bright light crimson. From inside its dragon throat came a low but impressive rumble. I yelled at the top of my voice.
>
> "The pipes are on fire! Quick!" (175)

The pipes, like the voice of the devil, "gurgl[e] redly," and "chortle evilly" until Wes, the suitor, defies Grandfather's order to leave the furnace alone and puts out the fire with some "magic powder" (177). It is as though he is dousing the old man himself. If, indeed, the old man is shown as a kind of Lucifer of the

[1] According to biblical legend, Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities destroyed by fire from heaven because of their unnatural carnal wickedness.

underworld, he is well balanced by the "angels" who tread above him.

When not being presented as a basement demon, Grandfather Connor, whom Vanessa had imagined was "immortal" (189), appears as the controlling and punishing Old Testament god. His word is law, whether or not it is true. When he declares that the local train is "due at five-twenty," both Vanessa and her grandmother knew "that was not correct . . . . But neither of [them] contradicted him" (125). This kind of godlike power to erase the truth is exemplified in Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted On The Voyage* (1984) when Noah insists that Hannah record events that are clearly untrue–for example, that there is a miracle snowstorm when, in fact, there are ashes, probably volcanic, falling from the sky (21). Even though his physical power has diminished with age (15), Grandfather Connor still rules the Brick House, demanding subservience from all who come in contact with him. After his funeral, even though she is "not sorry that he [is] dead" (198), Vanessa remembers a time when she looked up to him, "in the ancient days when he seemed as large and as admirable as God" (190). Earlier, she places herself at about four years old when she actually *liked* her all-powerful grandfather and drove around in the car with him:

> And the car was flying, flying, flying, through the widespread streets of that enormous town, and its horn was bannering our presence as we conquered. *A-hoo-gah! A-hoo-gah!* I was gazing with love and glory at my giant grandfather as he drove his valiant chariot through all the streets of this world. (166)

In this vision they are actually conquering the town with the horn of the car, and Vanessa experiences the incredible freedom of flying through the world, triggered by the idea that she "could hear that horn again, loudly, in [her] head" (165). When she is part of the power-vehicle with her grandfather/god, gaining a sense of exploration and liberty through their actions, she feels good. It is later, when she becomes separate from the god image that she loses her sense of power by association and becomes alienated from what was once an admirable force. She loses her faith in both her grandfather and in God as she grows into her role as a female.

Grandmother Connor, as a female role model, "was an angel" (83), according to her husband, and she lives up to the name in her words and actions. Like Grandfather, she "did not believe . . . in smoking, drinking, card-playing, dancing, or tobacco-chewing" (25), but, unlike him, she did not forbid such things in her presence. She is presented as "all calm and forgiveness" (84), and regularly questions Vanessa on what she learns in Sunday School:

> "*How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle*," I replied instantly.
>
> "Second Samuel," Grandmother said, nodding her head.
>
> "That's very nice, dear." (14)

Grandmother thought "everything in the Bible was gentle," believing that "The swords were spiritual only" (15). Vanessa decides that she wants "to hold [her] own funeral service for [her] grandmother, in the presence only of the canary" (82), but, upon looking up Ecclesiastes in her Grandmother's Bible,

> got stuck on the first few lines, because it seemed to [her], frighteningly,

> that they were being spoken in [her] grandmother's mild voice - *Remember now the Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come out* - (82)

Her only jewelry was a cameo brooch, "with its portrait of a fiercely bearded man whom [Vanessa] imagined to be either Moses or God" (122). Upon meeting her grandchild, Chris, her first words are "Bless the child" (123).

As in most of the other Manawaka fiction, the evangelical Tabernacle of the Risen and the Reborn in *A Bird in the House* provides a foil for the more conservative Protestant interpretations of Christianity. Vanessa's experience with evangelicalism is highlighted in the title story, "A Bird in the House," through Noreen, her nanny. Noreen, a member of the Tabernacle of the Risen and the Reborn, is a teenager "interested not in boys but in God" (95). While the "decent and moderate" United Church that Vanessa attends with her family displays "pictures of Jesus wearing a white sheet and surrounded by a whole lot of well dressed kids" (95) in Sunday School, Noreen's provided a rich alternative:

> Noreen's fund of exotic knowledge was not limited to religion . . . . She could do many things which had a spooky tinge to them . . . . I began to think of her as a sorceress, someone not quite of this earth. (96-7)

Noreen seems to have both "the power and the second sight." Not only does she display an unusually strong sense of self, with her armpit hair blooming "like a thicket of Indian paintbrush" (96), but her exact "knowledge" of what heaven and hell are and her abilities of "communication with spirits" (97) place her as both a mystic and a visionary. Vanessa's father can offer nothing so concrete as Noreen in his description of heaven and hell; he can only suggest metaphors: "I don't think they're actual places. Maybe they stand for something . . . " (101).

It is Noreen who "had been concerned all along about the sparrow" (99), showing her kindness, and she who had "intimate and detailed knowledge" (96) of heaven and hell, and, unlike Vanessa's church minister, she who was willing to share her knowledge on a personal level, answering questions instead of just preaching answers. While the adults in Vanessa's life tolerate Noreen because they feel her world is "dull," Vanessa knows different:

> [Noreen] dwelt in a world of violent spendours, a world filled with angels whose wings of delicate light bore real feathers, and saints shining like the dawn, and prophets who spoke in ancient tongues, and the ecstatic souls of the saved, as well as the denizens of the lower regions–mean-eyed imps and crooked clovenhoofed monsters and beasts with the bodies of swine and the human heads of murderers, and lovely depraved jezebels torn by dogs through all eternity. (97)

Clearly, Noreen's religious beliefs, which allow for "the visitation of ghosts and the communication with spirits" (97), have a pagan flavour and an immediate power, whereas power seems available only to men in the religion of her parents. Indeed, in the final story, Vanessa realizes at the age of forty that, though she is no longer trapped inside the brick house, it will always remain inside of her, and that the "old man['s]" blood is running through her veins as well. She has been profoundly affected by the teachings of Noreen, who

presented the only religious possibility that seemed to empower women–at least insofar as Noreen herself was an example. These teachings are surely as responsible as the inbred stubbornness for Vanessa's final ability to empower herself by presenting a testament of her youth in the production of the stories. There is no encouragement from any of Vanessa's family to pursue her writing, and the examples provided by her aunt, her mother, and her grandmothers show no place for women other than as extensions of their husbands or fathers, usually pussyfooting around one or the other. Vanessa's voice, and everyone else's–except Noreen's–is constantly oppressed in the Brick House.

When a sparrow flies blindly around Vanessa's room, Noreen says, "a bird in the house means a death in the house" (98), and proves herself a prophetess in predicting the death of Vanessa's father. This is a highly significant point because Noreen symbolically represents the death of God-the-father to Vanessa as well, as we see later, acting as a catalyst for the child's eventual rage against all representations of the church. Since Noreen predicts the death, she appears, to the child, to be somehow responsible for it. There is something pagan–something wild and unruly–in the powers of Noreen, and Vanessa becomes apprehensive in her presence, finding new excuses "not to consult [the] oracles" (99) of the talking table and the ouija board. She is angry and confused, naturally, that Noreen's prediction of death comes true. Vanessa is torn between the United Church image of God that requires her grandmother to "ransom" her soul (again, placing God as a materialist–a blackmailer), and the tabernacle god that would have required her father to be "saved" on earth before entering heaven. Of the United Church she reflects, "If God did not think [Grandmother] was good enough just as she was, then I didn't have much use of his opinion" (100), and towards Noreen, who has been "praying every night that your dad is with God," even though "he wasn't actually saved in the regular way" (105), she lashes out, kicking and hitting her: "Shut up . . . He didn't need to be saved . . . . And he is not in Heaven because there is no Heaven" (105).

Vanessa holds God in contempt for her grandmother's death, and gives up on him altogether after her father dies. Christian Riegel discusses how

> Vanessa rejects the ordered means of grieving–prayer–that Reverend McKee offers . . . .After her experiences with how organized religion deals with death, Vanessa rejects outright the notion of an afterlife. ("Rest" 76)

Isabel Huggan points out that, "Unlike the women of the Manawaka novels who often converse with God as a means of sorting out their thoughts, young Vanessa is steadfastly self-reliant, having given up early on God" (194). God's power is that of a petty blackmailing materialist, or is based on technicalities, neither of which she can respect. That Noreen seems to hold some of the power that the other adults in her life attribute only to "god" is unbearable to Vanessa.

Many themes from *A Bird in the House* foreshadow those in *The Diviners*. The concept of story-telling, of dispelling old and creating new historical myths, is suggested in these stories. And the presence of God, in both male and female forms, is pervasive. While survival is still a theme in this

work, and, as Diana Brydon points out, "Silence is a survival technique mastered young" (193), Vanessa moves beyond the silence to become a writer. Though her voice does not become physically audible, it is "heard" in the sense of being read.

Of the eight stories presented, five include animals in their titles, as motifs of spiritual captivation or freedom within the stories. While the first two, and the final, stories focus on the Brick House, the others use animal imagery to express subtly pagan, or pre-Christian, ideas surrounding the goodness of nature (as opposed to civilization), cyclic order (as opposed to linear), and pantheism–the understanding of the divine within all objects, animate and inanimate–as opposed to monotheism, where God resides in a person-shaped theory in the sky. The animals also serve as symbols of dis-order: they cannot possibly be "civilized," and as such are especially dear to God, for Vanessa feels that "whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order" (61). The animals specifically focused on are the bear, the bird, the loon, the horse(s), and the half-husky. A brief look at each of these will reveal how they are invested with a kind of mystical power common in native North American beliefs, and ultimately empowering for women.

"The Mask of the Bear" puts Grandfather Connor in a coat made from a brown bear from Galloping Mountain, where there is a Cree reservation. Even at the age of ten, Vanessa recognizes how the bear coat reflects the true nature of the old man, surly and volatile: "*It's you*, I would simper nastily at him, although never, of course, aloud" (63). That the coat works as a mask for his feelings is made abundantly clear on the day his wife dies, when he startles Vanessa by "not wearing his great bear coat" and shows emotion other than anger for the only time: "He bent low over [Vanessa], and sobbed against the cold skin of [her] face" (79). Vanessa is aware in her later life, when she sees a Haida Indian bear mask in a museum, that, before it was set aside as a piece of art, "the mask had concealed a man" (86). The bear as a symbol of strength is incorporated in both the culture of North American natives and of ancient Greek mythology, where the Goddess Artemis, "the Beautiful She-Bear" (Barbara G. Walker 363), takes her place in the sky as the constellation commonly known as the Big Dipper. Grandfather Connor is vulnerable beneath the mask of his obstinacy. Yet his image as one of power is built as strongly on the bear disguise as it is on the imitation of Yahweh.

"A Bird in the House," the title story, depicts the lowly sparrow as a harbinger of Ewen MacLeod's death, fulfilling the prophecy that Noreen recognizes: "A bird in the house means a death in the house" (98), instead of the biblical verse that Vanessa expects: "*God sees the little sparrow fall*" (98). While Noreen is the earthly interpreter, the bird itself is a symbol of entrapment and fragility: "It lay on the floor, spent and trembling" (99). Although there are other strong bird images in this, and other, stories, such as the talon-like grip of Grandmother MacLeod (89), the sparrow is one which is nearly destroyed by the confines of the house and is only freed by Noreen's intervention. In Christian terms, the sparrow represents the weak and the seemingly insignificant. The rest of the hymn Vanessa expects justifies God's love for humans by noting how much he loves nature:

God sees the little sparrow fall
It meets his tender view
If God so loves the birds and flowers
I know he loves me too.

In human terms, the only person in the story who takes conscious note of birds and flowers is Noreen.

The near fate of the sparrow in the confines of civilization is a forerunner to the actual fate of "The Loons" as they are crowded out of the lake Vanessa visits with her parents and their guest, Piquette Tonnerre, a "French halfbreed." Their cottage is surrounded by images of nature, "ferns, and sharp-branched raspberry bushes, and moss that had grown over fallen tree trunks" (111), and they can hear the loons at night, although Ewen has told Vanessa that, as more people come to the lake, the loons will disappear. The conflict between the natural and the cultivated world is clearly defined in the call of the loon:

> Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by aeons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home. (114)

The loons become a symbol for the disintegration of the native peoples, as represented by Piquette, as well as the disappearance of wildlife at the lake, as years go by. Piquette was already a "dead loss" as an Indian (114) in Vanessa's opinion for not knowing the ways of the woods, but when she sees her a few years later in a coffee shop, drunk, with bright make-up and a perm, the parallel between the dwindling species is obvious. That "Diamond Lake had been re-named Lake Wapakata, for it was felt that an Indian name would have a greater appeal to tourists" (119), is almost too satirical. The lack of respect for nature, which results when it is treated as a commodity instead of as a temple, becomes a step in the destruction of humanity, represented by the indigenous (and female) Piquette, as well.

The dark story "Horses of the Night," takes its name from "Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* (*"O lente, lente currite noctis equi!"*)[2] when, just before midnight, Faustus is about to sink into hell" (Kertzer 70). The horses in this story are central to Chris's attempts to journey *out* of his hell. He tells Vanessa about the horses of his imagination, Duchess and Firefly, names that suggest societal elevation and iridescent freedom, while the real horses' names were Floss and Trooper, both of which imply labouring utilitarianism. The tiny saddle Chris crafts for Vanessa seems to invite her to ride out of Manawaka, into some better world.[3] Such a journey would be invaluable to a writer such as Vanessa. Chris's affinity with the horses, both real and imagined, places him as one who invites harmony with other creatures of the earth, instead of trying to rule over them.

Chris represents the New Testament Christ. He loves children, is pure of heart, and tells stories. Even though Chris(t) actually follows in Grandfather's

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[2] Marlowe takes his words from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Kertzer 70).

[3] Barbara G. Walker describes the horse as "a common symbol of the soul journey . . . to the Other-world, or to the land of the dead where the visitor might learn the great secrets of life, death, and magic, and return to earth with godlike wisdom" (378).

footsteps to some extent, becoming a door-to-door salesman in much the same way as the old man "used to load up the buckboard with kettles and axes and that, and take it all around the countryside" (17), he differs from him greatly in most ways. Unlike the rigid and cold-eyed grandfather who makes Vanessa listen, "fidgeting with boredom, while he talked of the past" (17), Chris is a warm "respector of persons" and has "hair the color of couchgrass" (123), showing the earthy nature of his physical attributes as well as his emotional ones. She cannot get enough of his stories about the ancient lake and sleek horses from Galloping Mountain that Chris is always willing to tell her. Chris creates stories and "fantastic objects for [Vanessa's] amusement" (126), and, though clearly intelligent, seems to prefer the company of children to adults.

Chris eventually goes mad from his inability to reconcile the role of God in the universe and his own role in the war. He believes the stars and the planet "could have existed forever, for no reason at all," because the "alternative [is] to believe in a God who is brutal. What else could he be?" (140). He is appalled by the possibility of the war being considered a "godsend," meaning that it was sent by God ("What kind of a God would pull a trick like that?" [141]), and that it was a gift to the jobless. When Chris is sent home from the battlefield because he has a "mental breakdown . . . . He had been violent" (142), it is a result of his inability to integrate the actions of his body with the pacifist belief system of his mind: "they could force his body to march and even to kill, but what they didn't know was that he'd fooled them. He didn't live inside it any more" (143). As Jon Kertzer puts it, "Chris loses his mind rather than his soul" (71). Vanessa, however (like Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*), maintains her sanity because "she observes but does not participate in the madness that she sees" (Kertzer 69). Chris never achieves the power or the freedom he imagines for his horses.

The penultimate story, "The Half-Husky," presents a classic example of the conflict between the wilderness and civilization through the instincts of a "wolfish" husky (definitive of the Canadian north) and the domesticated house dog. Superficially, Nanuk's "Eskimo" name and mixed-blood status place him with the Métis (a person of mixed white and native American Indian heritage), as well as the socially "savage" Harvey Shinwell, who torments Nanuk until the half-husky becomes as barbarous as Harvey. Both Harvey and Nanuk become dangers to society as a result of their treatment by others, and the reader feels that both could also have been saved–Nanuk from chloroform and Harvey from prison–had they been treated kindly by their respective societies. At a deeper level, however, the wolf-dog works as a symbol of power for women.[4] The wolf, aside from its European history as the "Great She-Wolf" (Walker 393) goddess, has a long and powerful history among the North American natives as a source of wisdom and strength. The killing of Vanessa's pet half-husky, then, becomes symbolic of the intolerance of female power, and perhaps of the inability of society to allow a sense of wilderness or the untamed within the confines of what we call civilization.

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[4] According to Barbara G. Walker, during the inquisition years, "the church . . . associate[d] dogs with female-oriented paganism" (371), since the canines appeared as companions to Goddesses long before "gods or men" were seen with them (Walker 370).

A Bird in the House is a masterful blending of Christian and nature symbols and the ways in which Vanessa responds to and identifies with each. Her power of imagination and her words transform biblical imagery into a personal vision of lush energy:

> To me, the woman in The Song [of Solomon] was some barbaric queen, beautiful and terrible, and I could imagine her, wearing a long robe of leopard skin and one or two heavy gold bracelets, pacing an alabaster courtyard and keening her unrequited love. (66)

The ways in which Vanessa, as a child, re-creates the stories of the Bible to enhance her vision of women in positions of power and freedom, especially in wilderness situations, and her refusal to participate in the methods of gaining power presented by her grandfather and the Old Testament examples, show that she is intent on constructing new visions, despite the fact that the "old man . . . proclaimed himself in [her] veins" (191). As the narrator, Vanessa is finally in full charge, and ultimately decides what to create out of the stories. In some sense, one could posit her as a kind of god, the creator of the word in these particular stories. She decides, as the story-teller, exactly what kind of order will be created and what roles will be the important ones.

This presentation of narrator as creator and story-teller sets the final stage for Laurence's cumulative work, *The Diviners*, which fully develops the concept of an author who comes to terms with the power she has over her own life to the extent that she is able not only to embrace her own abilities, which Vanessa does, but also to evolve in magnanimity to the point where she empowers others (her daughter, specifically) as well.

Flow backward to your sources, sacred rivers,
And let the world's great order be reversed.

Euripides' *Medea*

God is really only another artist.

Pablo Picasso

Chapter 7
The Diviners

Water, the source of life and force of nature, and a power to be reckoned with even in Laurence's earliest works, comes full circle and full force in *The Diviners* (1974), her last major work of fiction. *The Tomorrow-Tamer* title story ends when the bridge "sacrificed its priest in order to appease the river" (*Tomorrow* 103), asserting that the steel bridge, that which was man-made, "was not as powerful as Owura. The river had been acknowledged as elder" (*Tomorrow* 103). The force of the river and its destinations–the sea and the ocean, are acknowledged throughout the Manawaka fiction as well, making the image itself something of a bridge of cultural beliefs and natural powers. Hagar's brother dies after falling into the Wachakwa river; Rachel loses her virginity on its banks; and the Tonnerre family lives further down the same river, in the valley where it "ran brown, shallow, [and] narrow" (*Diviners* 36). Stacey finds redemption when one of her "sea-children" is resurrected after a near-drowning; and, of course, *This Side Jordan* is explicitly and implicitly about crossing a river, bridging a gap. Carl Jung discusses some of the ancient symbolism connected with water in his *Psychology and Religion*, observing that the alchemists said "it had the effect of transforming a body into a spirit," and of making it "incorruptible" (129); he also points out how the body being transformed by water and fire is "a complete parallel to the Christian idea of baptism and spiritual transformation" (130). Northrop Frye points out as well that

> the theme of redemption out of water follows in the sequence that includes the story of Noah's ark, the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites, the symbolism of baptism in which the person baptized is separated into a mortal part that symbolically drowns and an immortal part that escapes . . . . (192)

Like most of Laurence's other titles, ***The Diviners*** connotes religious imagery, just as the titles Morag (the protagonist) creates do: ***Spear of Innocence, Prospero's Child, Shadow of Eden, Jonah***, and, quite likely, ***The Diviners*** itself, as the last line of the novel implies: "Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title" (477).

From the Latin ***divinus***, the meaning of the word ***divine*** is threefold: first, as an adjective, it is something godlike, celestial, or sacred; second, as a noun, it is a soothsayer, an ecclesiastic, theologian or priest; and thirdly, as a verb, it is to predict or foretell. A diviner is a ***human*** with supernatural or magical qualities; a diviner sees things hidden to others through intuition or special insight, or finds underground rivers in a scientifically unexplainable way. The word perfectly integrates the concept of human action aided by mysterious powers. The presentation of what is divine, or sacred, in this novel progresses from the earlier works. In this chapter I will look at how the river, representative of a nurturing and natural element, becomes a stronger force than the god presented in the earlier works. In the examination of the river, I will look at the structure of the novel as a whole and how the river winds through it, giving power and insight at the opening of each chapter, just as a divine source should. I will then examine several characters and how they are shaped by what they consider to be divine, and how (if) they become diviners, that is, seekers and finders of some pure and powerful source of energy, and how that energy, finally, is represented in the female form.

Susan Warwick says ***The Diviners*** "clearly is concerned with the injustice, prejudice, and oppression suffered by those lacking in influence and power" ("River" 12). ***The Diviners*** opens with the frequently quoted line: "The river flowed both ways" and closes penultimately with: "Only slightly further out, the water deepened and kept its life from sight" (477). At the beginning of each of the five sections of the novel, Morag is brought back to water images, showing the river as a power source not only of surface value, providing such things as transportation, beauty, and food, but also as that which inspires Morag's (and, we know, Laurence's) writing and connects to the far deeper underground rivers which are divined literally by Royland and figuratively by Morag.

The truth of the current is often obscured by what is seen on the surface. Part One, titled "River of Now and Then," describes a photograph of Morag's father and pregnant mother in which Morag is "still a little fish . . ." (15) and closes with Morag in tears, suddenly aware that her long dead parents are "inside [her], flowing unknown in [her] blood and moving unrecognized in [her] skull" (27). This places both Morag and her mother as metaphorical rivers of sorts, both sources of power, conscious and unconscious.

"The Nuisance Grounds" (Part Two) begins with Morag being awakened, "surfac[ing] groggily from the submerged caves in which she had been happily floating for some nine hours" (31). This draws a fairly explicit parallel between the dream world, or state of subconsciousness, and the idea of being under water, a common psychological metaphor. The dream world points to the past, films "sneakily unfolding inside her head" (36), while the surface, the

present, carries on in current relationships, and current space: those by the river. Morag's mining of her memories, her undercurrent, is much like Royland's divining of water, and at some level she recognizes that it is a similar kind of "grace" that allows it. When Royland asks why she is so interested in divining, she confesses to be of two minds about it: "I guess with one part of my mind I find it hard to believe in, but with another part I believe in it totally" (34). One could easily imagine a similar response to a question about believing in God. At the same time, her fascination with divining is partly because of its uncontrollability: "I always think, though, what if one day it doesn't work? And *why* does it work?" (34). Without full knowledge and understanding, she is left only with faith--she has to accept the reality of what she sees without any intellectual proofs or logic.

Part Three, "Halls of Sion," opens with Morag "not writing" but "Looking at the river" (185), and contemplating the strength of "faith" rather than "will" to spur her capacity to write. Like Royland's gift of divining water, Morag must depend on being given the gift to write--it cannot be willed. Water is representative of a powerful force to Morag, but not one she has any authority over. She is empowered by it, accepts gifts from it, but she cannot ***make*** it act, nor can she influence it in any way. This is the kind of god Hagar would have respected, rather than the one that would be swayed by her words. Her dependence on divine inspiration to write seems to place the act of controlling "the word" on some entity other than herself. This creates an amusing parallel to Margaret Atwood's insight in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred, starved for powers of communication, eyes the commander as he writes, thinking, "Pen is envy" (186), and putting a whole new twist on the often cited Freudian theory of "penis envy," which many now perceive as Freud's own projection of the male fear of castration. Atwood recognizes, as does Laurence, that the "pen" is mightier than the "sword," so to speak. Both protagonists want to be empowered to write. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also articulate this concept, saying that in "patriarchal Western culture . . . [a] pen is an instrument of generative power like [a] penis" (*Madwoman* 6). Laurence seems to be saying, however, that, like a penis, the pen is not always under complete control by its owner.

Having walked away from the "Halls of Sion" in part three, where her marriage suddenly is exposed to her as a false paradise, Morag progresses through "Rites of Passage" in part four, which begins with her facing winter, "walk[ing] through the yellowing August grass and down to the river" (307). Interestingly, the rites of passage contained here do not reflect the norm: these are not teenage initiations or marriage rituals, but rather her discovery of "a room of her own" (316) in the fashion encouraged by Virginia Woolf. And, unlike Christianity's Eve, who is seduced by a serpent, Morag is nurtured into healthy independence by a woman with a snake. Here Morag establishes her autonomy, has a child, an affair, and searches for her Scottish "roots." She moves from her conventional life as a wife, to an unconventional life as an inspired creative artist.

Part Five, "The Diviners," opens with Pique telling Morag about her sojourn to Manawaka and the shack of Lazarus and Jules by the river: "I could

hear the river–it's really more of a creek, isn't it? It sounded like voices" (461), thereby placing the river as something of a storyteller in itself, always accompanying the woman who finds her own voice and gains personal power and freedom as she gains the ability to speak her truths both in art and in actuality. However, as Mark Twain said about the Mississippi, "it had a new story to tell every day" (77). The river is the divine object of this novel, the source of power for Morag, the object of the quest for Royland. It moves from superficial beauty in the opening lines to mysterious depths in the closing, where it keeps "its life from sight" (477).

Other than the river itself, there are several manifestations of the divine. Along with the conventional "God" and Jesus, we are given divine characters of the secular world: namely Royland, Christie Logan, Jules Tonnerre, Catherine Parr Traill, and Morag Gunn herself. Unlike the human beings who present themselves as gods of sorts in the earlier works, such as Thor Thoralkson in *The Fire-Dwellers*, or Grandfather MacLeod in *A Bird in the House*, these "gods" hold more qualities of Christ than of Yahweh. As well as being gentler creators, those presented in *The Diviners* have distinctly un-Christian qualities, and some very powerful ones are women. If it is true, as Mary Daly says, that, "If god is a male, then the male is God" (*Beyond* 19), then we might ask, "If a Woman becomes god, does god become a Woman?" Unquestionably, Morag takes on the role of creator in this novel, and usurps the traditional power structures to a large degree in order to take control of her future and the future of her child, who is symbolically the consummate Canadian, being a fusion of Scottish, English, Aboriginal, and French ancestry.

At the surface level of the story, seventy-four-year-old Royland is *the* diviner, the man whose "work did not depend upon eyesight. Some other kind of sight. A water diviner" (12). Royland is portrayed as one with magical insight, the ability to discover water; but he is also divine in the earthly theological sense of being a priest. Royland lives a "maverick" life in his younger days, long before Morag meets him: he was a preacher. About halfway through the novel, Royland reveals his past to Morag:

> "I thought that I had the Revealed Word. God was talking to me, sure as hell, and probably to no one else. At meetings I used to give 'em real fire-and-brimstone. Strong men wept . . . ." (259)

He sounds like the preacher Murray F. Lees describes to Hagar in *The Stone Angel*. As Royland describes his ability to effect change in others, he also discloses how he stopped having sex with his wife because he "thought it was wasting [his] powers" (259-60). But if sexual intimacy was a waste of his powers, physical abuse was not:

> "She hated it all, but she never stood up to me. If she tried, I brought her down like a shot sparrow, with my speech and also with the back of my hand. Yep. I thought it was a blow for the Lord." (260)

After his wife drowns herself (surely an irony, considering his present profession), he comes to realize that he had been "crazy as a coot" (260). One might even say that his ability to divine underground streams is a gift from his wife's drowned spirit, coming up through the earth to twitch his rod, so to speak. Now, however, he would rather "find water" than "raise fire." He

would rather discover things than rule over them, a concept of freedom brought up in Constance Beresford-Howe's *Book of Eve*, the heroine of which also realizes the incredible joy and sense of power in *finding* things after a lifetime of earning or being given things. Morag goes a step beyond just finding truths to the point of creating them. Hans Hauge puts it this way:

> As far as I can see it is impossible to decide if divining is finding a meaning behind the surface or projecting one into things. Is it finding sense or making it? Morag is clearly aware that she reads nature in an anthropomorphic way. She doesn't *find* the truth, she *constructs* it. (125, emphasis Hauge's)

Though Beresford-Howe's Eve, a housewife, and Laurence's Royland, a preacher, are totally different characters, they both experience high relief in walking away from their conventional roles and into places where they invent new lives by finding for themselves, instead of following the easier paths laid out for them by others, in which they have more traditional types of power. Both recognize the loss of personal power inherent in following the road more traveled, even though by societal standards they both had more power in their initial positions (he as a preacher, she as a respectable wife and mother). One senses they are closer to the divine in their unorthodox choices, just as Morag is in hers. Laurence seems to situate the *status quo* as the least likely place to find a sense of personal affiliation with a divine source, especially for women.

Royland's past as a maverick preacher does not seem to affect Morag's regard for him, nor his position in the novel as a kind of "shaman" (308) of the new order: "Morag always felt she was about to learn something of great significance from him, something which would explain everything" (12). The intensity of Royland's evangelical experience, his abuse of power–particularly power over a woman–and his decision to opt out of it, shows a new pattern in overthrowing conventional religion. Though Royland's resignation of an orthodox power position is more subtle than Morag's abdication of marriage, it is an important exposition. Except for Murray F. Lees (in *The Stone Angel*), we do not see any evangelists give up their "faith" in Laurence's works–and Lees only counts marginally, since he admits he was full of doubt even when immersed in the church life, perhaps like Matthew in "Drummer of All the World." Tim Struthers suggests that, even though Royland, Christie and Jules act at different times as shamans for Morag, she eventually "grows from the role of penitent into that of a priestess," thus becoming one who performs her own "rituals of transference" (43).

Royland's story is the most blatantly destructive description of power abuse within the church. He states clearly how his belief that he had the power of God led him to utilize physical strength over others, especially women. This kind of action is justifiable within the Old Testament. For instance, Joshua receives word from God not only condoning his destruction of Jericho, but giving detailed instructions on how to carry out the eradication of all the people within the city. The Old Testament god often appears vengeful and blood-thirsty: Jeff Rovin points out a few of the large-scale disasters, such as "killing 509,070 citizens of Bethshemesh for daring to look upon the Ark (1 Sam. 6:19)" (Rovin 32). The young Royland follows Old

Testament examples of violence; the old Royland follows his intuition to divine sources (using *divine* here both as an adjective and a verb) of life-giving water.

The Diviners presents several examples of how the Christian church affects characters' senses of themselves, their power in society and the delivery of their souls upon death. Morag's adoptive parents, Christie and Prin, whose "real Christian name is Princess" (43), serve to reveal much of the subtle Christian prejudice against the poor, showing how far twentieth-century Christian practice has deviated from the example of Christ's practices that Morag learns in Sunday school. Prin is a huge woman who slips into the back of the church on Sundays after everyone else is seated. When Prin dies, no choir sings at her funeral: "It's not usually done," the minister says, "unless the deceased is a well-known citizen" (272). This, of course, is technically a lie. Prin would indeed have been very "well-known" in the sense that all of the community knew who she was; what the minister really means is that it is not usually done unless the person is wealthy.

Lazarus Tonnerre, not only poor but Métis as well, fares even worse than Prin in the hands of the church upon his death. Even though he was "supposed to be R.C.," neither the Catholics nor the Protestants would "have him" in their graveyards (289). While the reader is left with an image of the Christian churches as being most uncharitable in this case, there is almost a sense of relief about Lazarus being buried "up Galloping Mountain way," where there are no headstones–"Just wooden crosses, plain pine or whatever comes to hand, and the weather greys them" (289). This seems more genuine and natural than if he were put in the same region as "the stone angel," for example. Interestingly, though, the Métis churchyard bears the sign of the cross, thereby validating the Christian symbol as one worthy of worship. The curious ability of the indigenous people of this continent to assimilate Christianity into their established "pagan" practices, which worship nature and the earth instead of a human-like god, is uncanny, though it could be argued that they had little choice, given the political force that came with the missionaries.

Christie Logan is a Christ-like prophet and a scapegoat in the novel. He walks among the "muck" and comes to know people by what they produce. Christie acts as an initial model for the re-telling of stories, as he mutates the biblical words of Jesus: "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?" (Matthew 7:16). Christie knows people through another kind of produce–their garbage:

> "By their garbage shall ye know them," Christie yells, like a preacher, a clowny preacher. . . "by their bloody goddamn fucking garbage shall ye christly well know them." (48)

Christie launches a speech, one might even call it a sermon, with the structural form and poetic rhythm that any preacher would envy. It is perhaps a measure of the persuasiveness of Christianity throughout the novel that swearing–using "the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain" (Ex. 20)– is one of the most effective poetics.[1] That swearing and calling upon the Christian god are similar in root

[1] Interestingly, in most native North American languages "There are no swears" (Carr 15); if

is exemplified in Christie's last words to Morag, after she tells him:

> ". . . you've been my father to me." . . . .
> "Well–I'm blessed, Christie Logan says.
>
> Another way of indicating surprise would have been to say–*Well, I'm damned*. But that is not the phrase he has chosen. (420)

As well as being a man of curses and muck, Christie is a philosopher and a prophet:

> *If you want to make yourself into a doormat, Morag girl, I declare unto you that there's a christly host of them that'll be only too willing to tread all over you. –Proverbs of C. Logan, circa 1936.* (120)

A master liar, Christie tells Morag stories from her first days with him, yet also manages to tell the most truths. From his "socialism of the junk heap" (56) to his description of the fictional Morag, which seems to anticipate the woman she becomes, he seems to have "the second sight":

> and a strapping woman she was, with the courage of a falcon and the beauty of a deer and the warmth of a home and the faith of saints, and you may know her name. Her name, it was Morag. (60)

Christie presents a good example of what Morag says about fiction being "more true than fact" (33), something played on in the novel with the double-edged words he fears will be on his tombstone: "Here *Lies* Christie Logan–He Meant Well" (178, italics mine). This echoes Timothy Findley's perception that fiction is " all about . . . achieving the clarity obscured by facts" (*Inside* 181). One can hardly help feeling in the end that there is more truth in Christie's lies than there is, for instance, in the so-called truths of the history books.[2]

A Christ figure in both his philosophy and his role as collector of sins (i.e. garbage), Christie recognizes the importance of words and their sacredness, regardless of what language they come in. He brings home a Holy Bible in Gaelic from the garbage, piquing Morag's interest: "Throwing out a Holy Bible! Oh! But would God mind so much, seeing it was in Gaelic? (*What means Gaelic?*)" (51). Christie regrets that he never learned Gaelic from his parents, but is intrigued by the unknown language anyway and draws Morag's interest: "Read some more in *our* words, eh?" (75), says Morag, indicating her sense of connection with Christie and his history. Her debt to Christie for a sense of place is further demonstrated when, as an adult, she finally rejects Scotland as her homeland, saying that "the land of my ancestors" is, instead, "Christie's real country. Where I was born" (415). This implies that she feels she was actually born in Christie's stories. Morag *chooses* her history, refusing to have it relegated to her by books or by blood.

There is, however, a good deal of Christian influence on Morag from both books and blood. Morag loses both of her parents to "the infantile paralysis," when she is only four years old, and she immediately starts talking to God about it. *Someone* must be responsible for this incredibly powerful act: "Morag is talking in her head. To God. Telling Him it was all His fault

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one speaks Cree or Haida, one must switch to English to swear.

[2] In a similar manner, I expect we learn far more about Laurence herself from her fiction than we do from her memoirs.

and this is why she is so mad at him. Because He is no good, is why" (25). As a child she seems more willing to display anger at God and to judge "His" decisions than she is as an adult. Nonetheless, Morag makes an interesting distinction between God and Christ or, perhaps more accurately, between the Old Testament and the New Testament in an unusual way which leaves the reader with a concept of two gods, a kind of polytheism in a monotheistic religion, for, while Morag hates God, she "loves Jesus" (87). It is obvious why a child would prefer Jesus to God, especially as they are presented in a Sunday school environment, where God is "mean and gets mad at people for no reason at all," while Jesus "is friendly and not stuckup" (87). Jesus is an underdog–he defies the existing power structures, whereas God is frightening and can not be trusted "as far as she can spit" (87).

Morag's first attempt at rewriting biblical history is a verse poem about Jesus that she shows to her Sunday school, describing "the cold and wintery blast" (89) in Bethlehem. While the teacher points out the unlikeliness of winter in the desert, we have to wonder if the chilly atmosphere Morag describes is not simply a projection of how she feels in the church, where so little warmth seems to dwell.

Eventually Morag, like Laurence, writes like a woman possessed: "The only meaning *work* had for her was writing, which was peculiar, considering it was more of a gift than work" (110). Laurence comments more than once that she feels she is a channel for the words to come through rather than a conscious articulator–especially once she starts the Manawaka works.

This seems to hold true until *The Diviners,* which she says was "one of the most difficult and exhausting things [she has] ever done" (*Dance* 201). Writing *The Diviners* was more difficult because Laurence had become so conscious of re-visioning history, or "herstory," as she calls it in her memoir. In *The Diviners* her actual self is writing, as opposed to the "other" power writing through her that she speaks about. Only here, then, does she actually take control, expel the gods that have been haunting the characters of the other novels and choose another kind of voice of wisdom: that of early Canadian pioneer, Catharine Parr Trail–a "saintly" woman and a homemaker (at the most literal level). Morag learns several versions of *his*tory: the mythical from Christie; the idealized from Jules; the winner-tells-all in school. But in the end, she writes *her*story, fully aware not just of the duality, but multiplicity of historical and personal truths. When Pique wants to know what "really happened" in her own and her mother's history, whether "those stories . . . happened like that or not" (373), Morag cannot give her a straight answer. She says, "There's no one version" (373). While this is an unsatisfactory response to one who wants to know truths in a recordable, objective manner, it is the most important truth stated, and repeatedly demonstrated, in *The Diviners*. The difference between this novel and the others is the awareness of possibilities for choosing truths consciously instead of having them chosen for you. The voice of God is uncontrollable in her other fiction. While the white-haired wonder hardly makes an appearance to the adult Morag in *The Diviners*, he is not altogether absent. Following Prin's funeral, as Morag realizes her husband Brooke may not be the "Prince" she hoped for, she thinks: "*Help me, God; I'm*

frightened of myself" (274), obviously relying on her societal instincts of whom to call for help. Morag is given a powerful insight into her marriage while Prin's favourite hymn is being sung by the paltry few in the church:

> Jerusalem the golden
> With milk and honey blest
> .....
> They stand, those halls of Sion,
> All jubilant with song,
> And bright with many an angel
> And all the martyr throng; (273)

While the "milk and honey blest" may be an ironic play on Prin's obesity, the visions of Sion have a profound effect on Morag. The contrast between Prin's sparse life and the "jubilant" halls of Sion seems to trigger an awareness of how falsely Morag is living her own life, presented as "jubilant" and "bright" on the outside, but wasting away on the inside. The hypocrisy of the church makes her see the duplicity in herself and triggers a flood of truths that she slowly integrates into her consciousness, eventually necessitating the break-up of her marriage.

Morag's marriage to her one-time professor *Brooke* Skelton is a conspicuous deviation from the path and depth of the *river*. However, to say their relationship totally reflects the connotations of his name (shallow, babbling, skeletal, cold) would be unfair. It is fair to say, though, that Morag does not reveal the depth of her personality or experience to him. She hides her true spirit. In their first out-of-class conversation she tells him she was brought up by "acquaintances," and that she was hardly affected by her parents' deaths (210). In this way she keeps her past "shallow," not revealing, perhaps even not knowing, the depths of past influences she carries with her, though she does know that what she tells Brooke is somehow "untrue" (210): "I just feel as though I don't have a past" (211). He eventually elicits a promise from her that she will not disclose her past: "I only want to know you as you are now. . . . Never be any different, will you?" She answers: "Never. I promise" (215), thus sealing the underground river of her past for the duration of their relationship. But, like the other Manawaka works, *The Diviners* is in many ways a "conversion fable" (Thomas, *Wild* 408), and Morag's conversion to a glossy surface cannot long contain the geyser beneath. If knowledge is power, then maybe Brooke's lack of true knowledge about Morag ultimately keeps him from being able to have lasting power over her. Her relationship with Jules, on the other hand, in which there is usually full disclosure and deep knowledge of each other's pasts, is much more potent.

While Morag seems to take Christie's advice seriously about not becoming a doormat, she does allow–even will–herself to be molded by her husband, preferring to have him write her story, so to speak, than to write it herself. As Neil ten Kortenaar puts it, "Brooke is an imperialist . . . . [and] she is virgin territory" (14). His colonization of Morag replicates his history as an Englishman in India. And her ability to free herself from him is dependent on her claiming her own past. We know that, as a girl, "Morag loves to swear" (44) but she curbs it as a teenager in order to fit in better. However, nowhere

is Morag more convincing than when she first reverts to Christie's idiom in front of Brooke to strengthen her argument against his use of the pet name "little one," calling on "judas priest and all the sodden saints of fucking Beulah Land" to affirm that she is "no actress at heart . . . and that's the everlasting christly truth of it" (277).

As Morag leaves behind the men who have been most influential over her (God, Christie, Jules, Brooke) she begins to have conversations with a new kind of deity–one most unlike that of Rachel and Stacey. Instead of a male god-in-the-sky judging her, Morag's imaginary conversations take place with Catharine Parr Traill (affectionately referred to as "CPT"), who Anne Edwards Boutelle says is "elevated as a Canadian saint" (42) in this novel, but perhaps admired most by Morag for her power to name. It is naming, the assigning of words to objects, the control over language that is the most cherished position. Even Morag's saintly country neighbour

> can't give names to the wildflowers as [CPT] did. Imagine naming flowers which have never been named before. Like the Garden of Eden. Power! Ecstasy! I christen thee Butter-and-Eggs! (186)

But Morag is able, in her writing, to assign names, and it is no coincidence that the name of her first heroine is also the name of a flower: Lilac–a purple (i.e. royal), fragrant, hearty yet delicate bush flower–perhaps an echoing of Laurence's first female narrative voice, Violet, in the African story "The Rain Child," which appears in *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. Like CPT, then, and like the Genesis god, she does have the power to hand out flower-names.

But such power, such magnanimity, is "too good to be true. Like Catharine Parr Traill" (*Diviners* 374). Indeed, CPT believed in being "up and doing" in times of crisis, just as Nellie McClung did years later: "Work. That was life's remedy. Not philosophy or explanations" (*Clearing* 144). There is clearly a contrast here though between CPT and the other great colonizer, Prospero, after whom Morag titles one of her novels. Barbara Godard points out that "Prospero's magical wand is contrasted to Catherine Parr Traill's broom and mountains of housework" ("[M]othering" 34). In the process of elevating CPT to divine status Laurence is commenting on the differences between male and female authorities. Brooke, for example, like Prospero, wants to control people and their actions, and is astounded when he is not obeyed; Morag, on the other hand, like Catherine Parr Traill, wants to control words, and is inhibited by having to do housework and rear a child. And let us not forget that CPT is the namesake of King Henry VIII's sixth and final Queen, who, according to Patricia Demers, was a spokesperson for the "predominantly theological" (88) writing of women at the time (mid 1500's).

Ironically, some of Laurence's naming of characters in this novel seems to have been subconsciously influenced; for instance she "did not know there was a Métis name Tonnerre" but came to "like the symbolic dimension of it, its connection with thunder" (Fabre Interview 202); nor did she know that *piquette* in French means *cheap wine*, until it was pointed out by Fabre, to whom she responds:

> This is funny. A coincidence. For me the connotation of Piquette was that of *pique*, of mischief, piquancy. But then this adds poignancy to

> the death of the Métis in the fire after drinking too much. (209)

The concept of becoming an *author* to attain power and *author*ity is one that literary theorist Edward Said has explored in some detail:

> *Authority* suggests to me a constellation of linked meanings: not only, as the OED tells us, "a power to enforce obedience," or "a derived or delegated power," or "a power to influence action," or "a power to inspire belief," or "a person whose opinion is accepted"; not only those, but a connection as well with the *author*–that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements. (83)

Obviously, though, Said is still seeing creation theory through a man's eyes, since he equates "a person who . . . gives existence to something" as a "father," rather than a mother. Laurence comments in *Long Drums and Cannons* on the tribal authority within African Ibo society, "an authority which carried with it a mystical quality and therefore a religious reinforcement" (202). That she seemed to admire this kind of authority indicates that she equates successful leadership with mysticism and polytheistic religion.

Laurence seems to lose her ability to write novels, to be an author, at the end of *The Diviners*, just as Royland loses his ability to divine water. But she does not stop trying to write: in 1980 she says in a letter to Gabrielle Roy that she has "three times made a false start at a novel" (Wainwright 186). Though she does produce a memoir, she "seem[s] more able to tell the truth in fiction" as she says herself in a letter to George Woodcock (Wainwright, 219). Royland says, "people often lose it, I mean the divining, when they get older"; he goes on to say, as many authors do, "that quite a few people can learn to do it. You don't have to have the mark of God between your eyebrows" (476). The secret, he tells Morag, is that one must "get over wanting to explain it" (476). Laurence herself, however, does not accept this loss of power as gracefully as Morag and Royland do. We know from her letters that she tried desperately to write another novel, but could not produce it. She did, however, publish some children's books, most notably *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980), which she realized a lot of people would "hate" because she does not "present Jesus as THE SON OF GOD . . . . I don't have the angel telling Mary she'll have a *son*" (Wainwright 213).

We do not know whether Morag also loses her "gift" at the end of the novel, but we do know she makes some of the same pilgrimages as Laurence does. Morag's sojourn into the woods to nurture her creative spirit, and her life in the isolated cabin by the river, demonstrate her affinity with the wilderness, with nature, and the powers that exist there. It is not the civilized constructions of man and his gods which grant her peace and productivity. Whether this kind of escape from the structures of society is pagan in nature may be debated, but certainly the worshipping of anything un-Christian, especially things of the earth, fits the definition. David Williams, in his paper titled "The Indian Our Ancestor," argues that "the subject of ancestors for Laurence must be predicated upon some unnamed form of continuance which transcends blood and biology and supersedes orthodox Christianity," and he sees the world of *The Diviners* as belonging "ultimately to the cosmos of the

pagan myths" (318).

Morag's immersion in nature is in good keeping with other Canadian female authors–not just Susannah Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill–but, more recently, Joan Barfoot, Ethel Wilson, and Margaret Atwood, to name a few. In *Surfacing*, Atwood's narrator seems to become a tree–"I am a tree leaning" (195)–before she is able to take any control over her own life. When she cuts herself, she "can feel blood swelling out like sap" (199). Alice Walker makes a similar kind of correlation in *The Color Purple*, where Shug describes the sense of power when God *and* nature combined: ". . . it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything; not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (178). This provides an interesting contrast to the men who settled *this* country, as Anna Brownell Jameson says in 1838: "A Canadian settler hates a tree, regards it as his natural enemy" (48), echoing Catherine Parr Traill who comments that

> Man appears to contend with the trees of the forest as though they were his most obnoxious enemies; for he spares neither the young sapling in its greatness nor the ancient trunk in its lofty pride; he wages war against the forest with fire and steel. (162)

The contrast between the female identification with nature and the male desire to control it is reminiscent of the natives and the bridge-builders in "The Tomorrow-Tamer." There is something of a tradition in women's writing to make their quest one of total escape from the confines of domestication, whereas men's desires are often more firmly directed towards controlling what has been civilized. Scholars, however, especially in the 1950's, were slow to recognize how they participated in upholding the *status quo* of the institutions they worked in, which were almost invariably funded and managed by Catholic or Protestant religious systems.

That Morag has trouble with the traditional interpretations of literature–just as Stacey did–shows her awareness of how women have been systematically oppressed and/or belittled in academe, just as she is by Brooke. She argues with Brooke in class about the treatment of women in Donne ("For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love") and Milton ("He for God only; she for God in him") and "reads Paradise Lost sneezing" (144). While Godard points out that "Laurence's handling of the Miltonic intertext makes it clear that this is a 'resisting' reading" ("[M]Othering" 56), I propose that her resistance goes beyond the literary order: each of the texts she refutes or subconsciously "resists" (e.g. by sneezing) is intricately connected to Christian mythology. Donne *swears* on God, and Milton positions man as God, and mythologizes the expulsion of Adam and Eve after Eve is tempted by Satan to "Taste this, and be henceforth among the Gods / Thyself a Goddess" (*Paradise Lost*, Book 5). She is aware, as Gunnars points out in her summary of Paul Hjartarson's "Christie's Real Country," that "the writer is the mythmaker, the shaman, the priest" (Preface x-xi), and in these cases the writer's positioning of man as God, and his invitation for woman to join in as "Goddess," is what she rejects. Unlike Milton's Satan, who thinks it "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (*PL*, book one), Morag rejects the godly-reigning-power concept, and instead stresses the importance of woman gaining ***knowledge***, presenting

naiveté as sin, as is clarified in Morag's first novel:

> Lilac's staggering naiveté is never presented as anything but harmful and in fact it damages not only herself but others. Innocence may well be the eighth deadly sin. (*Diviners* 244)

This is a direct revision of the traditional interpretation of the Adam and Eve story, where Eve's sin is eating from the tree of knowledge. The "Eve" presented in *The Diviners*, Eva Winkler, is clearly a case in point: she is an innocent and saint-like figure who is physically and emotionally brutalized by her father. Even as a child, Eva "is beaten by life already," and acts as a foil for Morag's resolve to "not–repeat not–. . . be beaten by life" (127). Eva's father is an unpredictable, raging, ferocious alcoholic, whose behaviour might be paralleled with that of the Old Testament god, especially as he is presented in Findley's *Not Wanted On The Voyage*.[3] Morag becomes the new priest, a pagan priestess, a mythmaker, by re-writing the texts given her and positing the female as heroine.

While power may be, as Henry Kissinger has said, "the great aphrodisiac" to men–as demonstrated by the actions of Mac ("say it doesn't hurt") and Luke ("You really wanted it, didn't you?") and Buckle ("You can't have it, see?") in *The Fire-Dwellers* or Chas in *The Diviners*: "'Did I scare you, Morag?' . . . He brings up one hand and before she can move away, he hits her with full force across the breasts" (350)–it is not something sexy for Laurence's female heroines. They want power in order to protect themselves and their families, and to attain autonomy, not in order to wield it over someone else.

In her essay "Caliban's Revolt," Barbara Godard points out how Morag's "rewriting of Christie's Piper Gunn tales in the feminine . . . , from stalwart helpmate . . . [to] a cultural hero in her own right" (208), acts in "shaping a new world through dialogue, not power and magic" (208). We are left to wonder, then, over the possibilities of power for intellectuals, as compared to, say, those who have "faith" and await gifts. What Royland seems to be saying is that the "gift" is not necessarily from the god he used to preach about. The "ex-shaman" (476) tells us that the gift, the power, comes not from intellectualizing, or scientizing; rather, it goes to "The inheritors" (477), a gift from ancestors. We know that Morag took her ancestors very seriously; when Pique and Morag discuss the inheritance of the plaid pin, Pique jokes about the euphemism of being "gathered to my ancestors" (474), to which Morag replies: "it's not [a] euphemism." Does she mean by this that she will literally be "gathered" into *his*tory? David Williams sees Pique as "the emblem of a new order of being." Pique's naming of her ancestral land through her songs, "restores the broken circuit, makes her one with her ancestors, in fact makes the Ancestors one" ("Indian" 315). Morag's willingness, and eventually encouragement, to allow Pique to create her own stories and songs is not so much an "abdicat[ion] of *author*ity" (Godard "Caliban" 225), as Godard would have it, as it is an acceptance–one might even say an appreciation–of forces beyond her control. The "mother-daughter relationship as . . . the source of

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[3] Findley's Yaweh has a yellow streaked beard, with "bits of food and knotted tats" in it: "[The] Lord Creator was a walking sack of bones and hair" with a mean disposition (*Not Wanted* 66).

inspiration for the artist-figure" is what Helen Buss calls "Laurence's most positive statement" (55) of this relationship.

Indeed, it seems that we inherit not only physical objects and characteristics from our ancestors, but spiritual beliefs and concepts as well. And the challenge is to accept them as the gift they are and rework these gifts with at least some consciousness, if not full knowledge, so that what is passed on next time has developed and, maybe, can offer new or enriched powers to the next generation–all this without ever having scientific proof of the divine. Yet Morag cannot shake the system of belief instilled in her in her childhood, even though she may not consciously approve of or literally believe in it, as is evidenced when she is reviled after having sex with Chas, whom she barely knows. Like Stacey, she can not quite believe she will not be punished for her "sins" by having her child harmed:

> I know it doesn't work that way, God. I know it but I don't believe it. My head knows perfectly well that retribution is unreal. But my blood somehow retains it from ancient times. (351)

For the same reason that her last words to Pique are "Go with God" (475) and that her memory is filled with lines of Psalms and hymns, Morag accepts her Christian heritage as part of her inheritance, though she puts her own twist on its stories. And the river that acts as a source of generative creative power for her symbolizes also the never-ending cycle of ancestral presence: the same water that flows in front of Morag's house flowed thousands of years ago as well, in a perpetual cycle of evaporation, precipitation, and filtration into the earth. With Morag as a filter, the ancient knowledge comes back to earth with a distinctly female flavour–she regenerates the power into words, thus curtailing the eminence of Christ to the point where he is roughly equal in status to any woman, or, more probably, the elevation of any woman to the place where she is roughly equal in status to Christ–or his pagan equivalent.

While all of Laurence's major works of fiction go some distance in revealing how women may and may not be empowered, *The Diviners* most explicitly grants spiritual freedom, and thus power, to the female protagonist.

. . . in the words of St. Paul, those mighty words . . "I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith." Perhaps, at the end of all our individual lives, as writers, as diviners, that is what we would hope for.
Margaret Laurence (Wainright, *Soul*, 73)

Words are like calves: when you release them they run to their mothers.
Gambian folk saying

Conclusion

Margaret Laurence seems to have used the Bible both as an inspiration and as a foil for her vision of empowering the spirit of women. Contemporary feminist theologians, naturally, do not all agree on the current usefulness of the Bible as a guide for spiritual growth. Mary Daly, whose books condemn sexist attitudes and practices in Christian tradition, urges women to reject, rather than attempt to reform, such a patriarchal institution.

Others, such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, accept Stanton's judgment of the Bible as androcentric, but do not think it should therefore be left behind. Fiorenza proposes, instead, a threefold approach: first, that the textual and interpretative sexism be pointed out and rejected as unauthoritative; second, that women's history be developed and written into the Bible; and third, that ways in which women have been empowered by the Bible be lifted up and proclaimed (Yarbo Collins, "Introduction"). The idea of preserving the Bible is echoed by Letty M. Russell, who says that, "In spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology" (138).

So, unlike Mary Daly's opinion that "A woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan" (*The Church and the Second Sex*, preface), Schussler Fiorenza believes that exploring the history of women in the Christian church can "empower women in their struggle against such oppressive structures" (Plaskow/Christ, 34).

Margaret Laurence seems to take this idea of empowerment a step further than Fiorenza suggests. Her explorations of women as role models in the Bible come up short, usually refusing definition as anything but wives, mistresses, and mothers and attaining power through their connective roles with males. Laurence addresses this lack of source material by rewriting history in *The Diviners* so that it does empower the female heroine. As critics such as Linda Hutcheon observe, history is basically the stories of winners, and since wars and stories of violent victory are usually men's stories, women become invisible except as grieving mothers and wives. Yet, as Carolyn

Heilbrun says in *Writing a Woman's Life*, new stories must be told before women can break away from old patterns. As Virginia Woolf's character says in *Between the Acts*, "It is time someone wrote a new plot" (Heilbrun 89).

Laurence develops new possibilities for empowering women by granting her characters "the power and the second sight " (*Diviners* 61)–the kind found in myths and polytheistic societies, as well as through some of the inherited belief system of Christianity. This power is the power to effect change in their lives, and the second sight comes through a combination of intuition, informed insight, and a vision of future possibilities, where women's spirits can be empowered through their own authority: their creative use of "the word," their willingness to taste forbidden fruit in order to obtain knowledge, and their integration into the garden where they develop a kind of shamanic respect for life beyond the anthropomorphic, is infused with spirit.

Recently (1997), Barbara Pell, in her essay entitled, "The African and Canadian Heroines: From Bondage to Grace," points out how Laurence's seven years in Africa set up a "desire for spiritual security" that has been "echoed by all her heroines since" (38). Kenneth Russell is among others who discuss this topic, saying that Laurence "has a profound and theologically sound sense of the mystery of grace" ("Seekers" 246).

Laurence admits in her memoir to being disturbed

> that so much of the Christian ritual is male-oriented. Women are just not there in our hymns . . . except, of course, for Mary, the one constant–and virginal–representative of our sex. (*Dance* 14)

She points out that "Women have been intentionally excluded from . . . many of the rituals and practices and words of Christianity, and the same is true of other monotheisms" (15), and comes to the defense of "other religions, some of them polytheisms . . . . believed so evil [by Christian missionaries]," but which "had and still have the concept of a god . . . both male and female, mother and father, earth and sky" (*Dance* 15). Her belief that "women are an integral part of the Holy Spirit" (13) and that "the recognition of the female principle in faith, in art, in all of life must come about" (15) probably contributes largely to her claim that she is not an orthodox[1] Christian. If we take this, and her discussion of the "magnificent sculpture called 'Crucified Woman'[2]" (15) which awed Laurence with its "naked and somewhat stylized female figure, slender, almost emaciated" (16) forming a cross with her body, we can see that the concept of a female god or Christ figure not only meets with Laurence's approval, but that she is desirous to promote it. She does talk about having a high mandate, saying: "I have a mystic sense of being *given* something to write" (Czarnecki 58). Knowing now from James King's biography of Laurence that she took her own life rather than leave cancer to take it for her, we can see the parallel between Laurence's actual death and

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[1] For a more complete discussion on the meaning of orthodoxy, see the "Introduction" to this project.

[2] "Crucified Woman," by Canadian sculptor Almuth Lutkenhaus, is now cast in bronze and on permanent display outside Emmanuel College, the United Church theological College at Victoria University in Toronto (*Dance* 16).

Jules' fictional one,[3] making her something of a mystic in predicting her own fate.

Laurence struggles with her own faith, but never totally relinquishes it. Like many artists, she says she is capable of holding more than one point of view at the same time. She uses the example of how she intellectually detests the hymn "Onward Christian Soldier," and yet feels moved and "stirred" upon hearing it. She attributes this not to unconscious beliefs in its validity, but to her awareness of its invalidity; she no longer believes it, and "you mourn your disbelief" (Cameron 112). She mourns the loss of her inherited god, but does not take this to mean there are no gods at all.

As Kristjana Gunnars points out, "Laurence shows the inadequacy of our inherited ways of thinking" (Gunnars, Intro. xii), which I would extend to the inadequacy of our inherited ways of perceiving god. Some novel approaches to faith are explored in her African fiction, acting as seed potential for her Manawaka works, slowly coming to fruition in the lives of Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa, and Morag (respectively), until they bloom into hybrids with new colours, offering a distinctly different perspective on freedom for those who can incorporate images of new gods, particularly female gods, into their lives.

I attended a conference on Margaret Laurence in Winnipeg in October, 1997. There was a great deal of talk there about her vision of herself as a Christian–talk which sometimes bordered on making Laurence a divine entity in herself, much of which may have been in defense of what some saw as her tainted image following the recently published biography by James King, which outlines her heavy drinking and smoking, her less-than-perfect parenting, and her suicide. I have tried in this project to contribute to the overall study of Margaret Laurence by elaborating on her unique insight into the possibilities for Christianity, which is not limited by traditional practice, though it may be rooted in it. Laurence tells in her stories, in her fiction, much more clearly than in her memoir or her essays, exactly how her vision might manifest itself. Her protagonists show us in their enhanced or diminished power over themselves the effects of worshipping a singular god instead of, more healthily, integrating faiths–something Laurence seems to have accomplished in her own life.

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[3] It is strongly implied in *The Diviners* that Jules takes his own life instead of waiting to die of the cancer which has almost overcome him.

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